



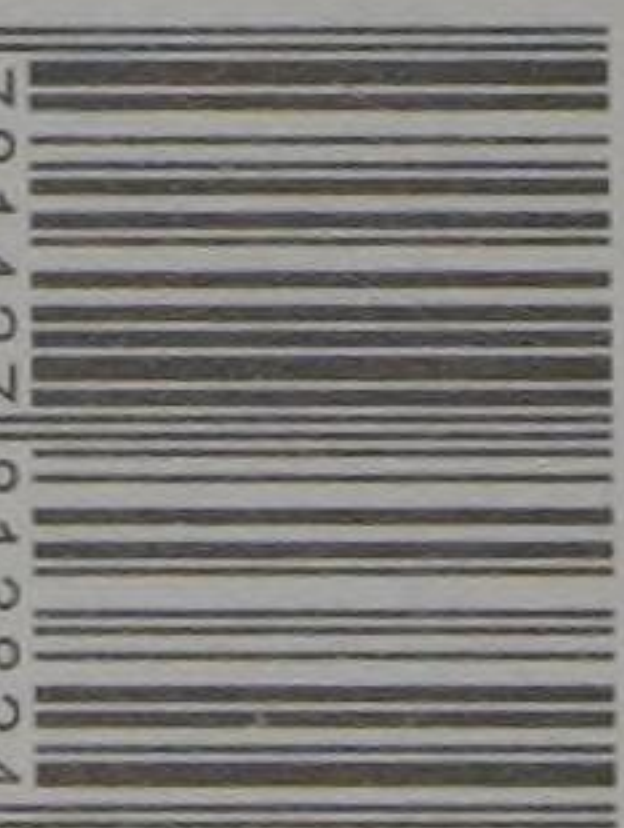
TOKYOPOP®

Vol.2 Borderline MMO

hack//G.U.™

Story Tatsuya Hamazaki
Illustration Yuzuka Morita

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hack//G.U.TM

VOL_02: BORDERLINE MMO

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A  **TOKYOPOP**® Prose Novel

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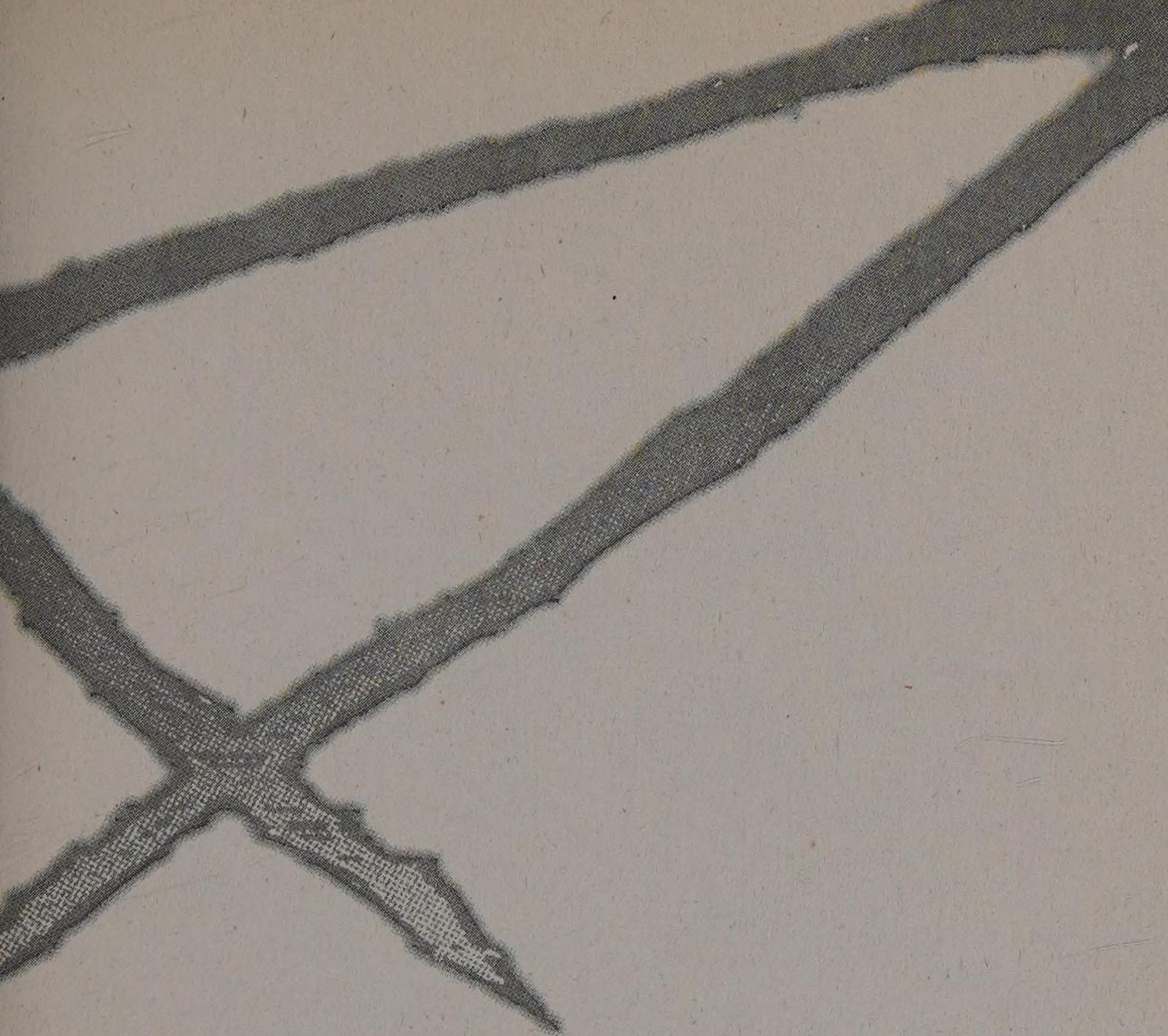
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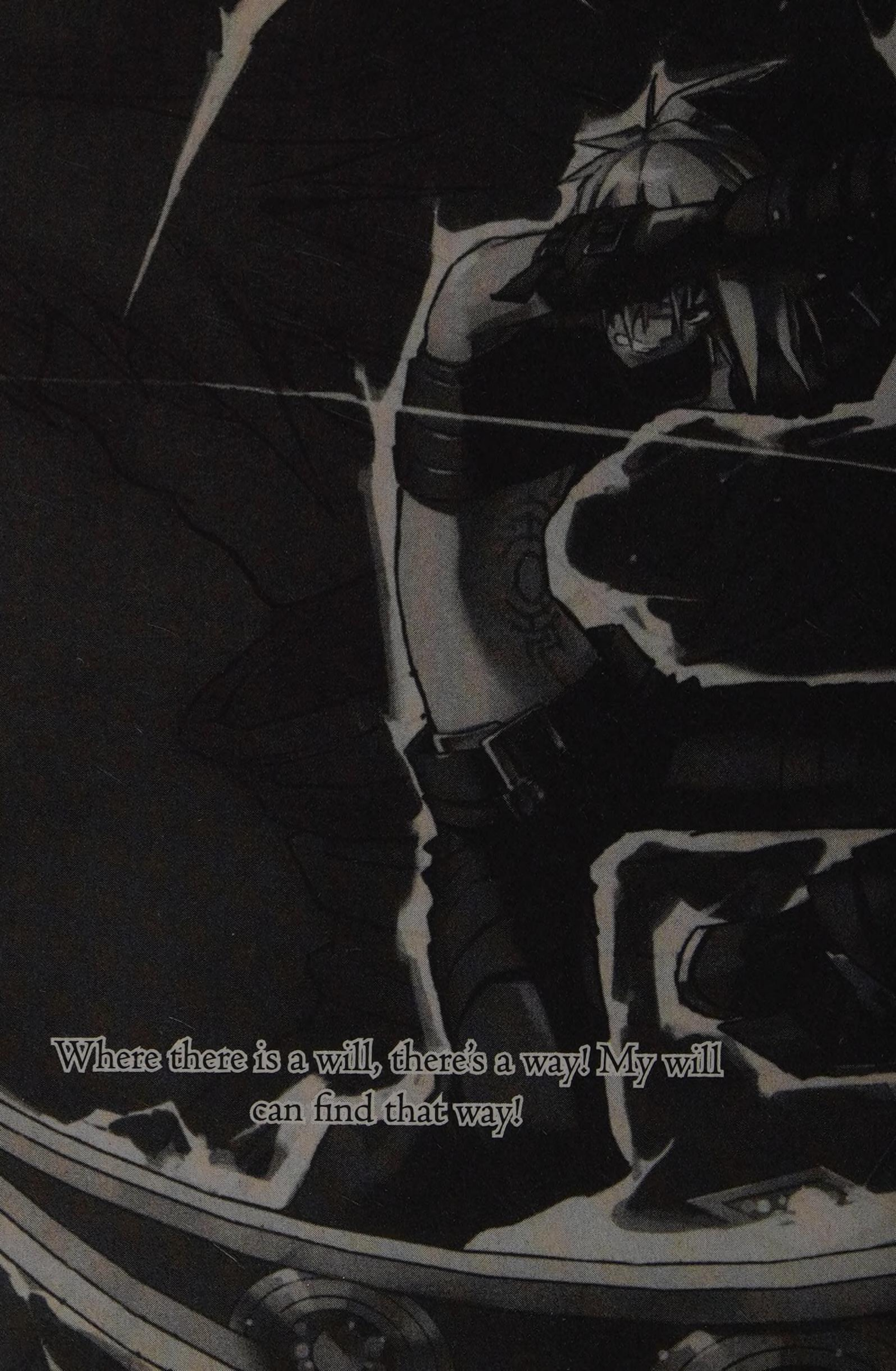
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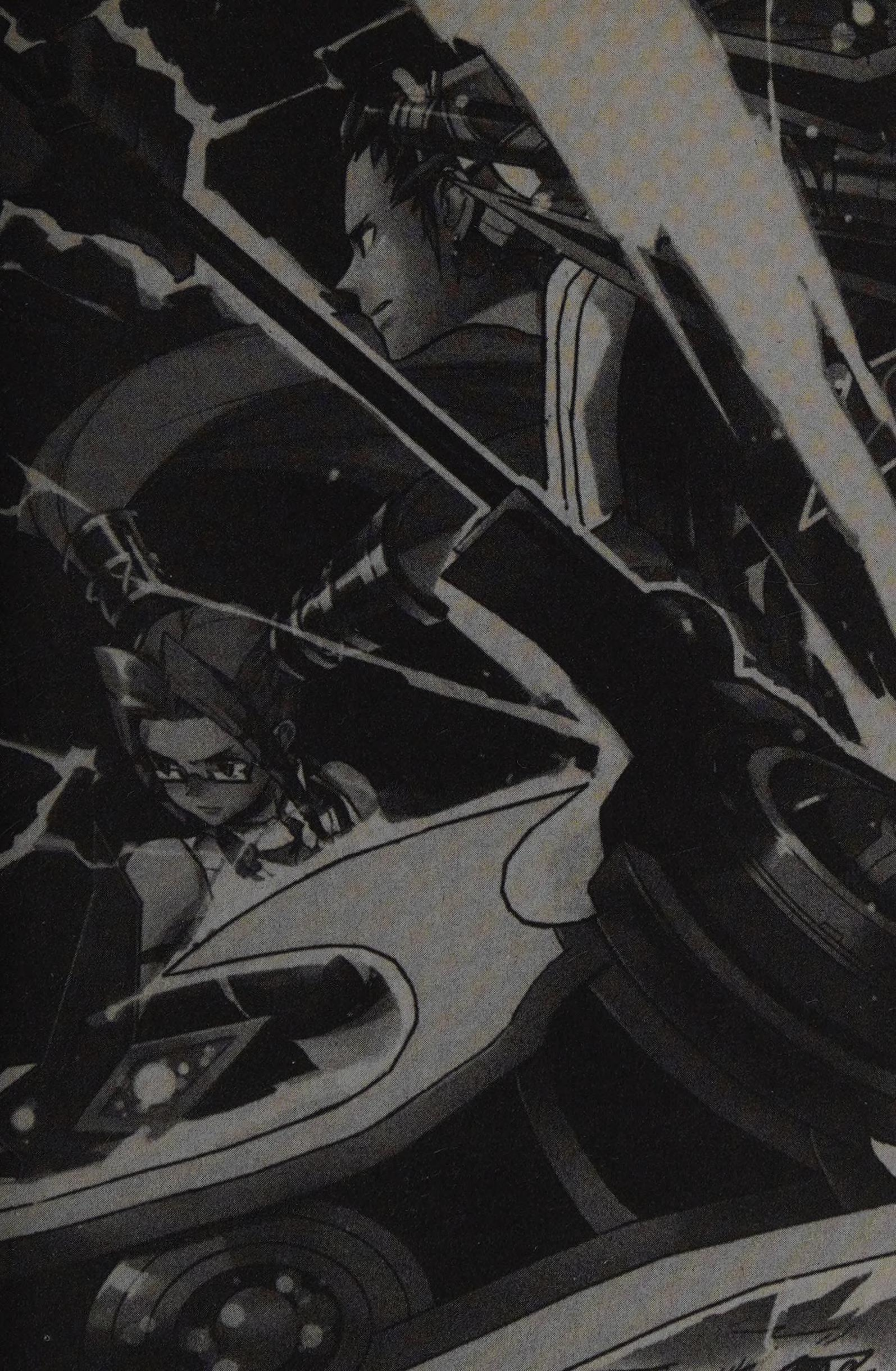
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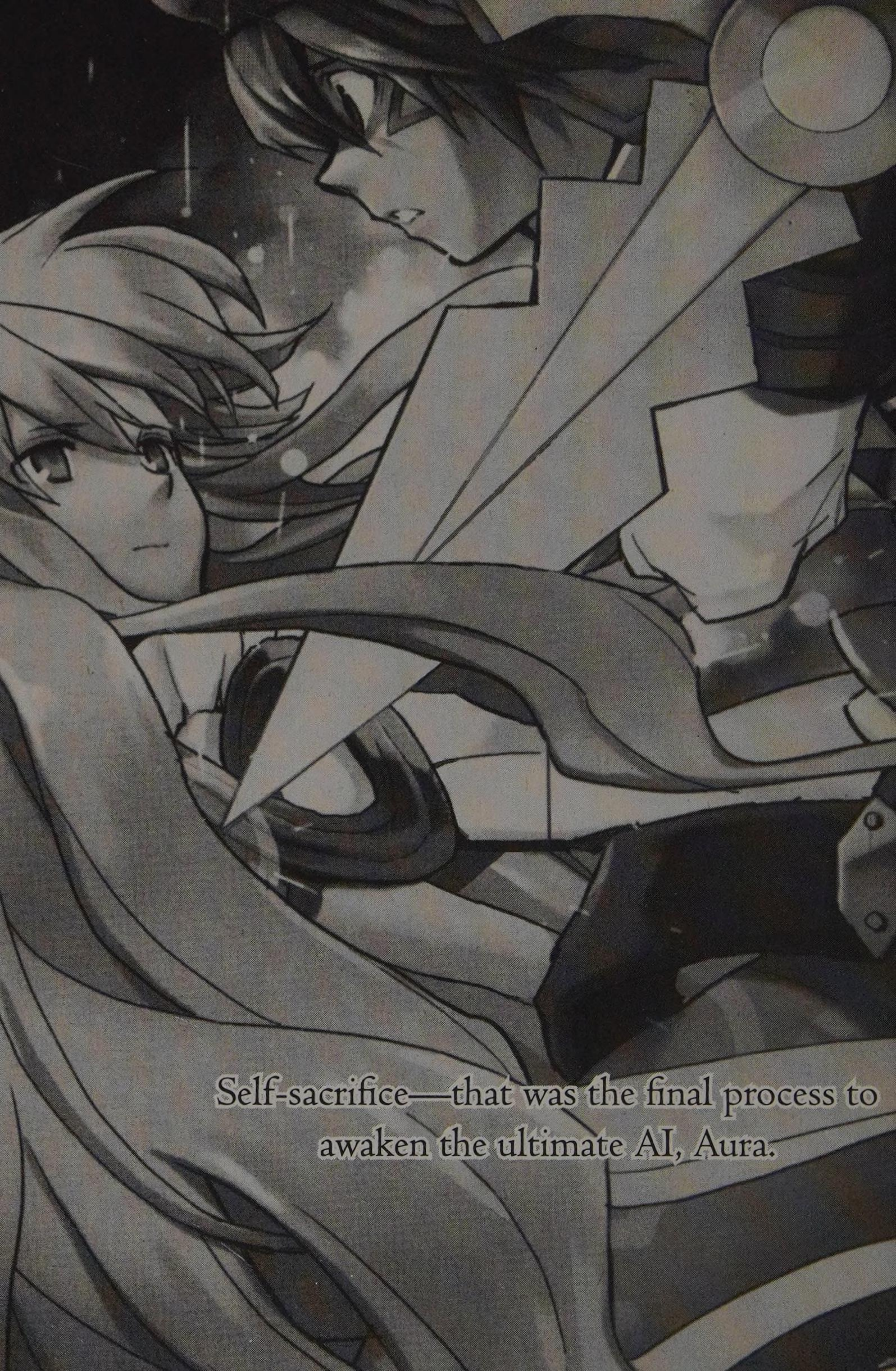


•hack//G.U.TM•



Where there is a will, there's a way! My will
can find that way!





Self-sacrifice—that was the final process to
awaken the ultimate AI, Aura.



Contents

Prologue ● 011

Chapter One: AIDA Server ● 019

Chapter Two: Reiko Saeki ● 141

Intermission: The Twilight Epitaph ● 164

Chapter Three: The Door to Utopia ● 175



YATA

Leader of the G.U. team, employed by CC Corp to tackle the AIDA. Uses a system called the Serpent of Lore, which allows him to view everything in The World



OVAN

Former master of the adventuring guild Twilight Brigade, to which Haseo used to belong. Haseo hasn't seen him for half a year.



AZURE KITE

The mysterious and illegal PK that Haseo is pursuing. He wields three bladed weapons and can utilize the illegal power, Data Drain.



SHINO

Member of Twilight Brigade with whom Haseo was close. Half a year ago she was PKed by Tri-Edge and has since been in a coma

hack//G.U. MAIN CHARACTERS



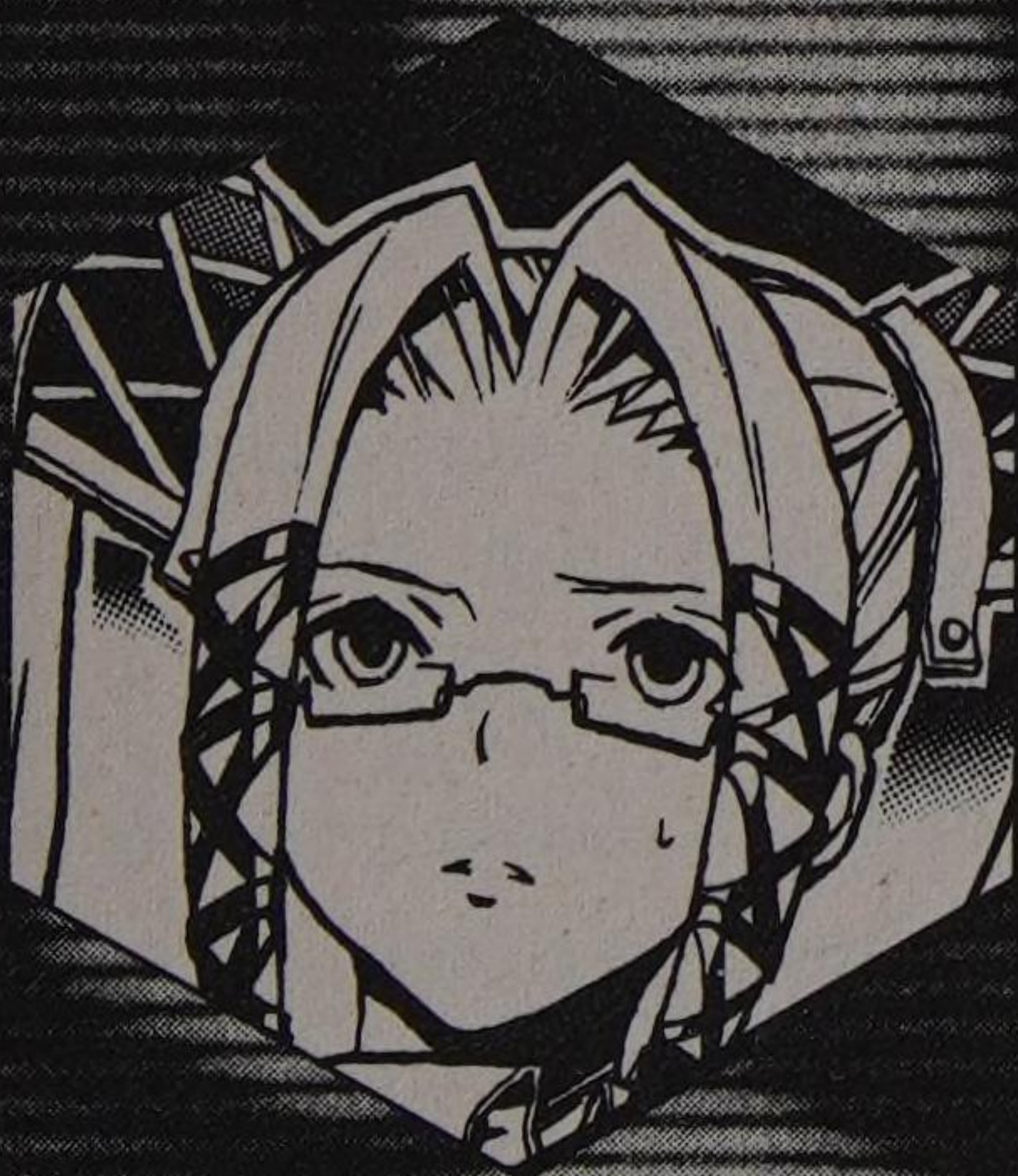
ATOLI

A Harvest Cleric of the pacifist guild, Moon Tree. Haseo saved her from being PKed.



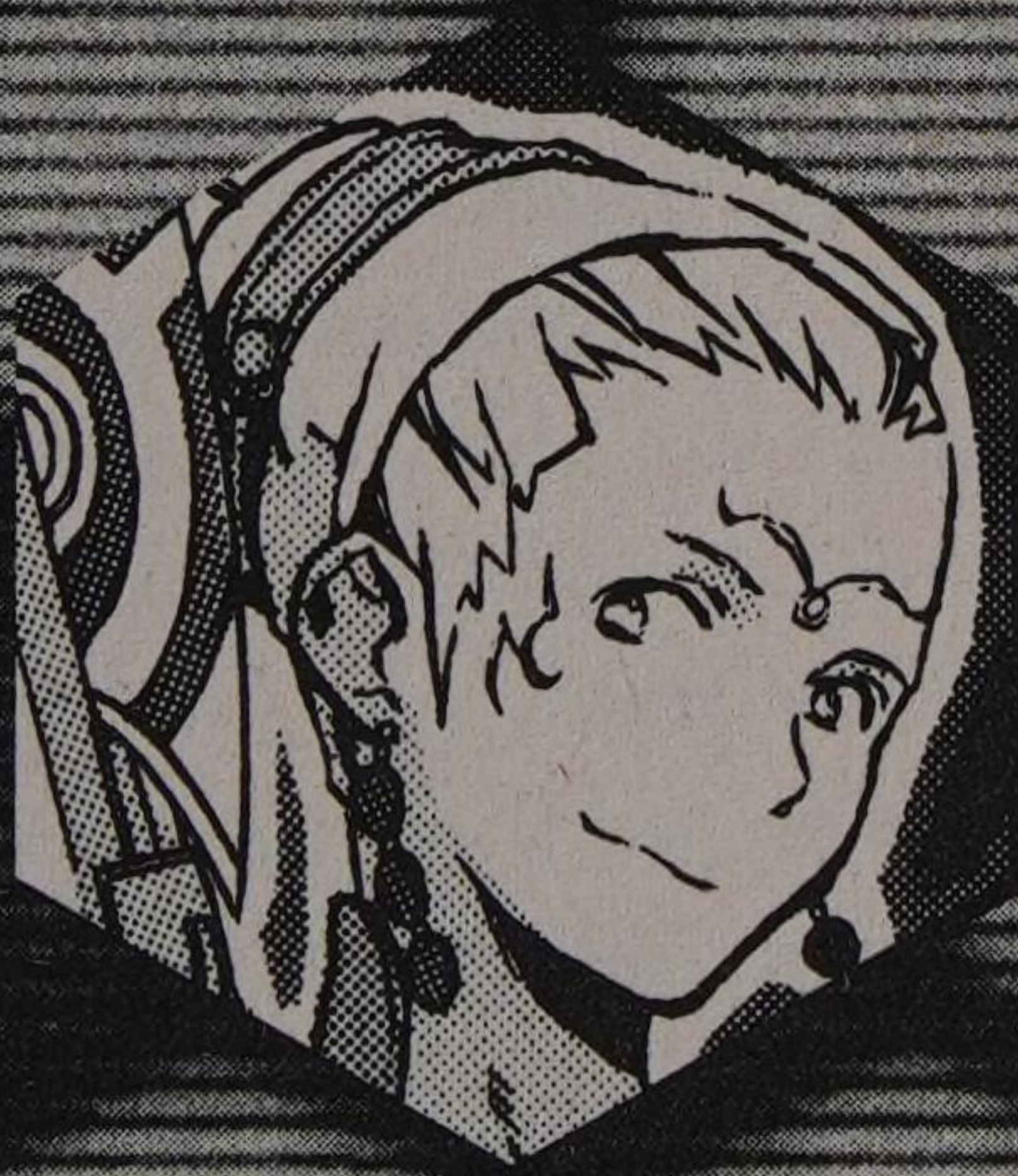
HASEO

PKK The Terror of Death. Is chasing the PKer, Tri-Edge, after he made Shino fall unconscious. Epitaph User of Avatar Skeith.



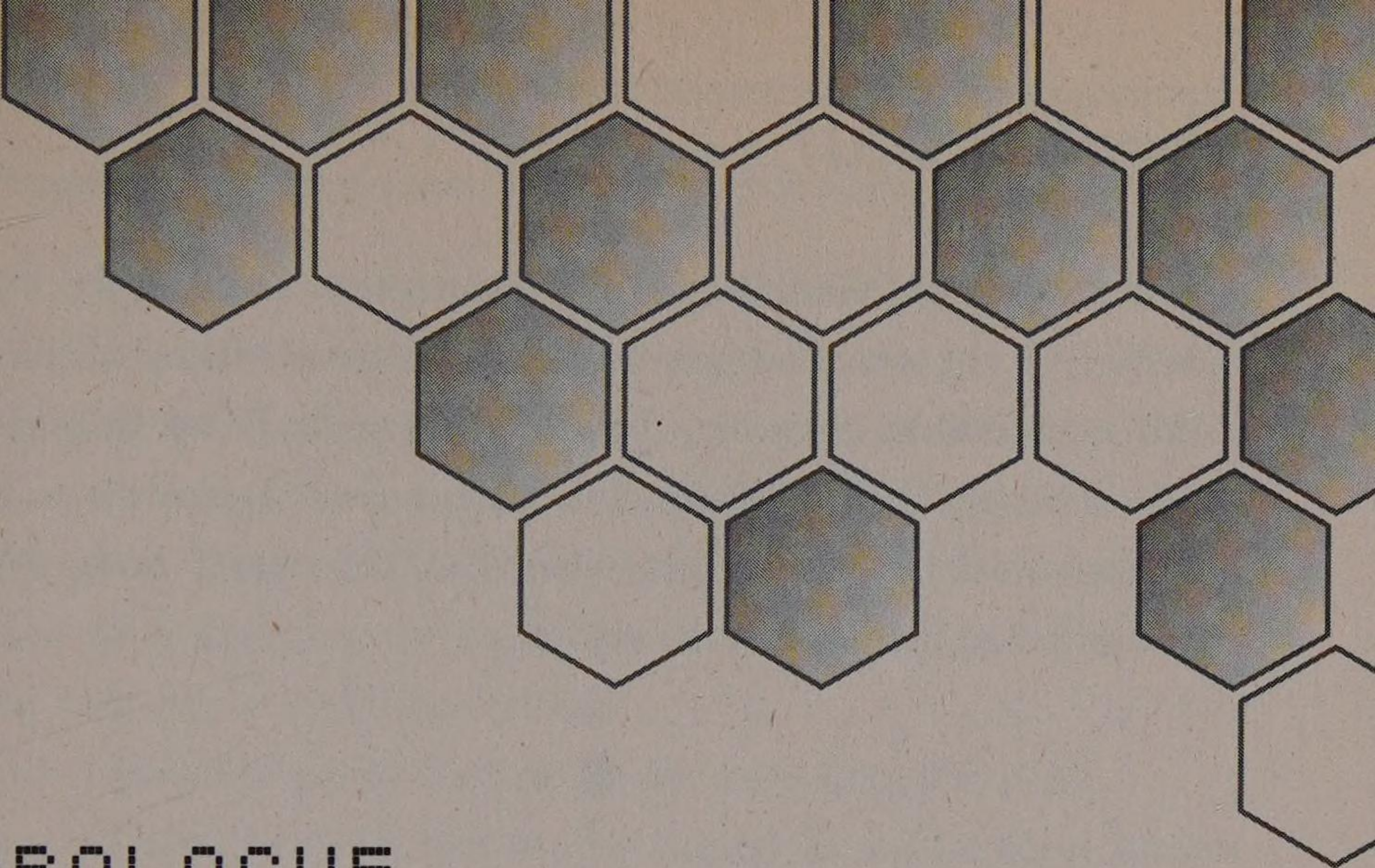
PI

An engineer of The World, employed by CC Corp. Epitaph User of Tarvos, The Avenger.



KUHN

A young man who wants to do what is right. Saved Haseo from the mysterious AIDA.



PROLOGUE

2007. SUMMER

The largest Internet game, *The World: R2*, is in turmoil after strange several incidents wherein players fall unconscious during play.

CyberConnect Corporation has established the G.U. Project to manage the mysterious AIDA virus, which is at the root of these incidents. The lives of the twelve million players who are registered in the MMORPG now lie in the hands of a few players who have an abnormal power, which allows them to link their soul with their in-game characters. These players are unofficially called “Epitaph Users.”

Seventeen-year-old high school student Ryo Misaki, who plays an Adept Rogue called Haseo, is chasing after the mysterious PK called Tri-Edge. His quest for Tri-Edge began after his own friend

and fellow player, Shino Nanao, fell unconscious while logged into *The World*. A sign that had been left by Tri-Edge at Morigu Barrow Wall mysteriously transports Haseo, along with Tribal Grappler, Pi, and Steam Gunner, Kuhn. The players find themselves in an area furnished by coin lockers, where they discovered Atoli, who previously had been lost in the system.



"I came here looking for you!" Ryo shouted at Atoli.

The clinically white, broken area was full of coin lockers. It resembled a train station's waiting room. It felt like in-game graphics and real-life photos were edited together. It shouldn't be part of *The World*. It was clear that this area was related to the illegal AIDA phenomenon.

This was dangerous.

"Really?" Atoli seemed to react to Ryo's words. She was standing in front of the lockers, recklessly trying to open one.

"I'm not good at expressing myself... but I don't lie."

The likeness was uncanny. At first he had not accepted Atoli because she used exactly the same PC as Shino had. He couldn't stand being with her. It was simply too painful. Ryo regretted how he had acted, now. He regretted what he'd said, which had all been half-truths and sarcasm.

In truth, he was simply scared. Maybe he didn't have the mental resources left to be nice to Atoli anymore.

The situation was critical now, though. Some players whose PC had been infected by AIDA had slipped into a coma to become Lost Ones. Other players' PCs had linked with the AIDA, but it had affected strange changes in their personalities. There was nothing to fight these sinister AIDA. The only thing he could do was get Atoli away from the source of the infection as quickly as possible. It was the only way he could protect her.

He had to pacify her and get her away from this place.

"I too..." Atoli said as she started to walk toward Haseo.
"Huh?"

Something strange happened.

Suddenly, the murky white sky appeared to ripple.

Flames sprung up from behind the data. A burst of intense heat hit Ryo's face. Ryo shrank back in real life. Epitaph Users were connected to their PC in more ways than simply the display and controller. The sensations of the PC were replicated in the player.

From the burst of heat emerged a zombie.

"Tri-Edge..."

Ryo's eyes opened wide.

Three white eyes scanned their surroundings. Ryo quivered as the zombie's eyes raked over him. It wielded a pair of triple-edged blades and was dressed in what looked like stitched-together rags. A three-edged sign was on the weapon he wielded.

The sign of Tri-Edge...

It was the same mark that had been left behind in Hulle Granz Cathedral, the site of a shocking PK. The same terrible sign that had

been carved into Shino's PC. This must have been the legendary PK who had sent her into her current unconscious slumber.

Revenge for the PK of someone he loved.

Embarrassment for temporarily losing consciousness after a single hit.

The shame of being returned to the state of a humble level-I character.

He had overcome all of this, and finally it was in his hands—in Haseo and Ryo's hands.

Being an Epitaph User. It provided a weapon... an Avatar... which could be used to control the AIDA.

Who was he now?

He was Ryo.

"What are you? A cheater? An Epitaph User? An AIDA-PC? Why did you take the consciousness of the Lost Ones?"

Ryo needed the answers. He had to stand up to Tri-Edge.

Haseo targeted the zombie.

"Lost Ones? What do you mean...?" Atoli asked. She didn't know about AIDA and everything else. She was totally flummoxed.

The zombie, Azure Kite, didn't offer any answers.

Taking out his dual triple-edged blades, Azure Kite suddenly resembled a killing machine. He leveled the blades at the green Harvest Cleric.

Atoli let out a short, sharp squeak.

"Crap! Like I'm going to let you do that!"

It wasn't going to happen again to him. This time Haseo had a power.

Ryo looked into the very depths of his heart.

The Adept Rogue got ready as if he were tempting the gods themselves.

He raised his hands to the heavens.

"I am... the Terror of Death!"

The symbol of the power he was calling appeared—crescent blades. His Avatar became a manifestation of Ryo's spirit on the Internet.

"Skeith!"

While feeling the intricately carved black handles in his hand, Ryo, as Haseo, assumed a fighting stance. The young Adept Rogue rocked back and forth, ready for action. The belts covering his body creaked slightly.

Ryo and Haseo were one. Ryo's thought moved Haseo's body; the connection was faster than light.

Pi and Kuhn, who were also Epitaph Users, started to call forth their own power.

"The Propagation, Magus!"

"The Avenger, Tarvos!"

A giant emerald lance made of diamonds appeared.

And a knuckle-duster covered in spikes also materialized.

These were Kuhn and Pi's Avatars. Only Epitaph Users who had had their eyes opened could use this power—the only power that could oppose the AIDA.

“A way to return those who lost consciousness...”

Azure Kite made his way for Atoli in front of the coin lockers; behind him, Haseo commanded Skeith.

“ANSWER ME!”

A three-colored Data Drain hit Azure Kite.

Azure Kite fell to his knees.

His tattered body crumbled under the Avatar's attack. The texture of the orange clothes made a data ripple. Just as Azure Kite had broken Haseo. This was the power of a Data Drain.

“Did he do it?” It was Kuhn who spoke. The pony-tailed man swung Magus like a windmill. He was ready to move in for the kill.

“He's going to erase...” Pi answered. She kicked at the floor with her red boots. The scantily clad Tribal Grappler stepped back and thrust at Azure Kite with Tarvos. There was no hesitation.

“WAIT! How do we bring back the Lost Ones?!” Ryo screamed. He needed to find a way to bring back Shino. That was his purpose in life.

Pi had already moved. It was only one attack. But in an instant, Azure Kite's body caved.

The spike of the knuckle-duster thrust through Azure Kite's chest, shattering him.

The aftermath made Ryo quiver. Tarvos struck like a bullet to Azure Kite. Bit by bit, the zombie's body broke apart. Azure Kite had been making his way toward Atoli forcefully, but now his body was like a pane of glass. Each piece of character data disappeared, one by one.

Prologue

The hands that Ryo held out had lost their destination.

He had controlled Tri-Edge, Shino's enemy. He'd had the power that he desired so much to defeat that enemy... But were the results what he wanted?

There was one thing Ryo didn't get.

"What the—?" Atoli gasped.

"Atoli...?"

"What were those weapons... that power...?"

"You can see Avatars?"

Seeing Avatars meant you also had the gift. G.U. had marked Atoli as a candidate Epitaph User.

Kuhn offered to help her open her eyes. But suddenly there was a banging noise from the coin lockers behind them. The lockers started opening in rapid succession.

There was something coming from the other side of the doors.

"Atoli! Get away from there!" Ryo screamed.

"Huh?"

The final door behind Atoli opened.

Black streams came bursting out from the lockers. The shadows were like human arms. Hundreds of arms came from the lockers and closed in on Atoli's body, wrapping around her arms, legs and hair.

They were like snakes consuming a small bird.

They were trying to pull her in. The open lockers started to shut, one by one, just as they had opened.

In Ryo's mind, her panic felt just the same as the other Harvest Cleric's he had known.

"ATOLLL!" Ryo screamed.

The black bubbles that indicated the AIDA effect were bubbling out of the cracks between the lockers.

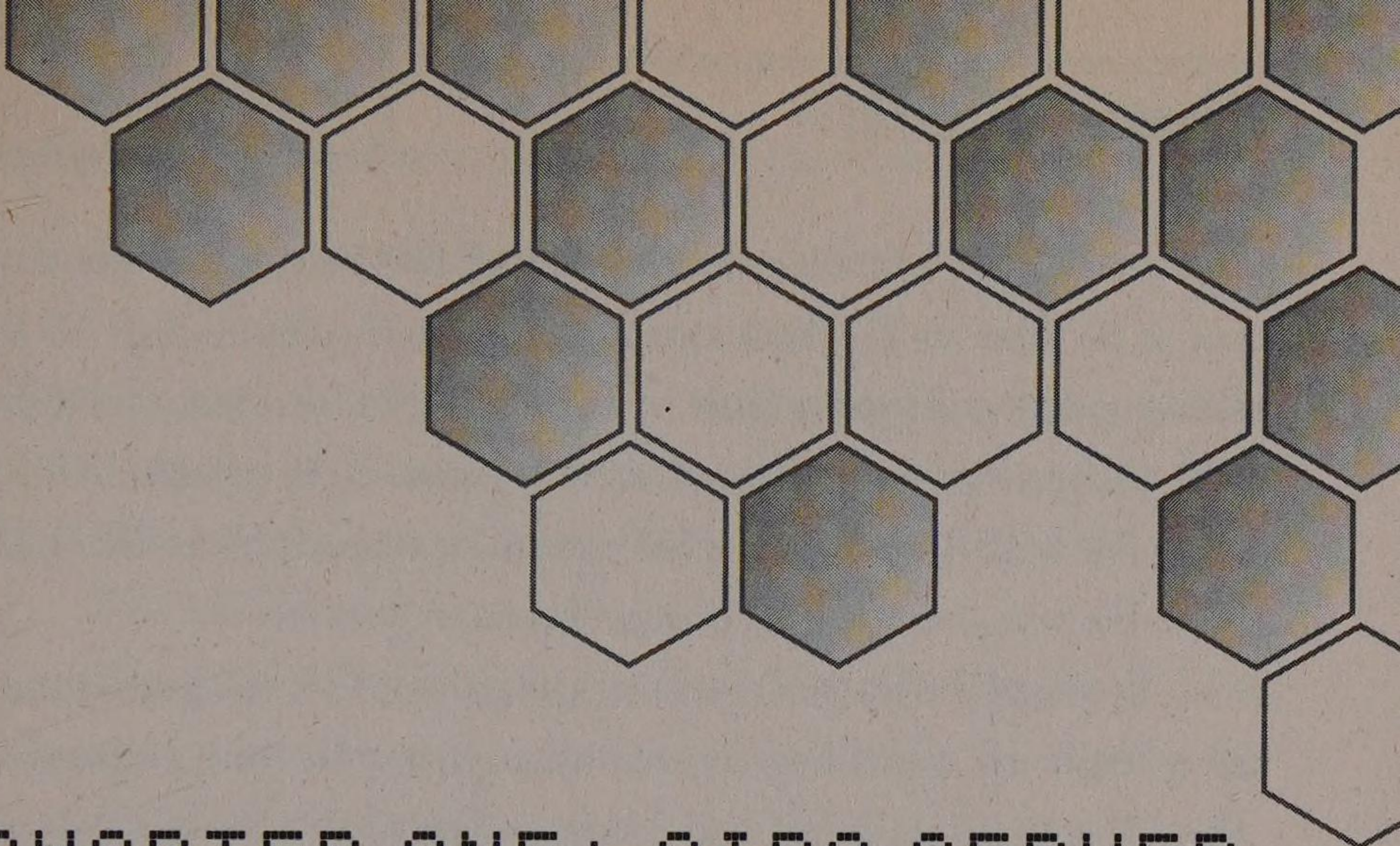
“We have to get out of here! This area is being corroded by AIDA!” Kuhn’s voice betrayed his distress.

Slowly, the black bubbles were consuming the ground on which they all stood. It looked like a pot boiling over. Perhaps the AIDA wanted the Avatars—wanted the strong will of the Epitaph Users.

“We have to get out of here NOW!” Pi screamed.
“HASEO!”

Ryo was still screaming Atoli's name. The Epitaph Users had no choice but to leave the Lost Ground. There was nothing they could do for Atoli now.

The AIDA had taken her.



CHAPTER ONE : AIDA SERVER

ONE

Ryo Misaki's house was located in a Tokyo suburbia residential area. It was normally quiet in the evenings, but tonight, the air resonated with the sound of fireworks. A friend of Ryo's had invited him via a text message to watch the show, but Ryo hadn't replied. Recently, Ryo had earned the nickname "junkie" from his classmates. They thought it was strange that he was always in *The World*. They didn't know what had happened... No, they thought they knew the reason he was obsessed with *The World*; they thought it was because he couldn't distinguish fantasy from reality anymore. They thought he was ill. There were lots of ridiculous rumors. Ryo was well aware that he wouldn't have any school friends left, at this rate.

It was a humid evening.

Summer vacation. Ryo was going to prep school and he had a huge amount of homework to do, but he hadn't even touched it.

When he'd been a freshman in high school, he'd been top of the class, but as his time in *The World* increased, his grades plummeted. All the failing grades had been a cause of concern for his teachers, and it had upset his parents, so he'd been forced to attend cram school.

But still, Ryo's lifestyle, his reason for living, was in *The World*. He was going to save Shino Nanao.

It was all he wanted—to save the girl who'd lost consciousness as a result of something in an online game. No one believed it; they all gave up, and they had forgotten her. Only Ryo remembered Shino. Only Ryo knew the truth of what had happened to her. He could sympathize with her. He had the ability. Only Ryo could do it, because he was an Epitaph User.

The doorbell rang, and his mother called up to him in his room on the second floor.

But Ryo didn't move. He stayed slumped over the desk with the sunglass-shaped M2D covering his eyes.

It looked like he had fallen asleep while still connected to the online game.

Ryo's body suddenly spasmed.

It caused his right hand to fall from the desk. The wireless controller he had been holding fell to the ground.

His mother called up to him once again.

Ryo didn't answer, but his body continued to spasm.



Raven @ HOME Serpent of Lore

Three Epitaph Users—Haseo, Pi, Kuhn—were standing in the hidden interior of Raven's @HOME, after narrowly escaping from the AIDA-infected area of coin lockers.

The Uroboros rotated.

The giant wall decoration was recording. The Serpent of Lore monitored everything that happened in *The World*. It was used by the G.U., CC Corp's anti-AIDA team.

"Atoli..." Ryo was fuming. He was angry at Pi, at Kuhn... No, he was mad at himself.

The PK, Tri-edge, the one who had hurt Shino... He had been so distracted by Azure Kite that he had forgotten why he was there and who he had come to save, and so the AIDA lurking in the coin lockers had kidnapped Atoli. He couldn't say anything; he was so ashamed of himself.

"If we'd stayed there any longer, we wouldn't have gotten out safe," Pi said. Her pink bunches swayed as she turned round to address Ryo. She had selected a pained emotion to appear on her Player Character's face.

"I should have exercised more caution. We had no option but to flee." Kuhn clearly felt responsibility for what had happened.

"No one could have anticipated that. We had to ensure the safety of an Epitaph User PC. If we lost this PC..."

"I understand, Pi. But think how Haseo is feeling. Haseo is worried for Atoli. She's an awakened Epitaph User, so she may be resistant to AIDA. But..."

Kuhn was worried too.

Epitaph Users were resistant to AIDA infection. However, that didn't mean they definitely carried antibodies to combat AIDA.

Atoli could hear the sound of the AIDA. . .

G.U. had marked Atoli as an Epitaph User candidate. However, Atoli hadn't awoken yet, so it was likely that she didn't have any resistance to the AIDA—not any greater than a normal player. Moreover, she was in even more danger just because she could sense the existence of AIDA. Atoli had approached the AIDA herself.

The AIDA in the coin lockers had gone after Atoli. . .?

Ryo was screaming internally.

Atoli had caught the eye of the AIDA precisely because she was an Epitaph-PC. Epitaph Users like Emperor Endrance of the Demon Palace arena, who played with the fake cat—and players like him—were confined in *The World*. Ryo felt a crushing frustration.

“We'll save Atoli, Haseo!” Kuhn tried to reassure him.

“First, we'll ascertain exactly what has happened. I'll log-out and do some investigations from there,” Pi said and then made a motion to log-out.

A ring of light surrounded the PC.

“What happened, Pi?” Kuhn sounded uneasy.

Pi should have logged out when the ring of light surrounded her, but she was still standing there. She pressed the log-out command a few more times.

“I can't log-out.” She was troubled. It was very rare that Pi sounded anything other than in control.

"Pi?" Kuhn asked.

"Wait... Where is this...? Where am I?" Pi pushed her glasses up her nose and closed her eyes, deep in thought.

"This is Raven's @HOME. We're in the Serpent of Lore," Kuhn answered her. He didn't understand why she was asking this.

"No, Kuhn. Not that. I don't mean that." Pi was dazed. "I mean... this is online, right?"

"Huh?"

"So where is the real world?" Pi was genuinely confused and scared. The tone in her voice begged for answers. She was asking to be rescued from some torment.

"Calm down. You're not acting like yourself. Are you confused because of the AIDA infection? Just take off your M2D and leave your PC there. It'll be okay." Kuhn took a sudden intake of air. The he looked as distressed as Pi did.

What?

"I'm looking at the Internet. This is *The World*, right?" Pi asked doubtfully. "Then, where is the real me?"

Kuhn didn't have a calm answer this time.

Pi and Kuhn were now equally distressed and confused. They looked at each other, dazed.

"What are you two talking about?"

"Haseo, can you feel yourself in the real world?" Pi finally made it clear what the problem was.

It was a ridiculous question. Ryo opened his hands and looked down.

But what he saw was Haseo's hands.

"WHAT?! What is this?! How...?!"

Finally, Haseo looked just as desperate as Pi and Kuhn.

He couldn't log-out. No one could.

"But... where am I then?" was all Haseo could manage to say.

He was looking at Haseo in the display, so where was Ryo Misaki? Ryo felt like he was Haseo in *The World*. He couldn't feel himself in his room playing an online game anymore.

That's impossible!

"What is this?" Even the cool-headed Pi couldn't manage to do anything else now but to mutter like a fool.

What could Ryo say or do? What emotion should he express?

This is a bad dream.

He couldn't take a thinking stance. He was far too lost in his thoughts. He was here, but he wasn't. Ryo suddenly remembered how he had passed out once at a wedding that he'd attended as a child, after his relatives had let him drink alcohol. That was the closest he'd felt to this before.

Am I really here?

Ryo was full of doubt now.

He couldn't feel himself. It was like he never even existed. It had to be a bad dream.

The Serpent of Lore started to flicker.



Several windows opened in the air, creating a tree diagram. They showed a video picture of what was happening in Root Town.

“What’s going on?”

“What happened to me?”

PCs were yelling out in the streets of Mac Anu.

“I’m trying again!”

PCs were surrounded by light as they tried to log-out, but just like Pi, they were left standing there.

“It’s not working!”

“I can’t log-out!”

In the Lumina Cloth arena, there was chaos among the PCs.

“What’s happened?!”

They were yelling at a group of PCs dressed in blue uniforms, who stood in front of the arena. These were CC Corp’s Game Masters, who acted as User Support.

“This is an online game. Right? I’m playing a game in front of my computer... right?”

“Yes, sir.”

The panicked PCs were turning all their attention to the dismayed GMs.

“But I’m not holding my controller! I can’t feel my chair! I can’t see the frame on the M2D!”

“Explain what’s going on! You’re a CC Corp GM!”

The Serpent of Lore displayed all the PCs’ yelling on the information windows. The blue GMs didn’t have answers, though. A situation like this probably wasn’t included in the Operations

Manual. The end-user support like GMs didn't even know that AIDA existed. How could they be expected to have answers to this? Even Pi, who was employed by CC Corp to be a specialist on AIDA, had been thrown into total panic by this development.

Ryo couldn't hold back the desperation.

"I'm looking directly at *The World*..."

He held his head in his hands. Through the cracks in his fingers, he could see the game, but there was no display or controller in between. The calamity had struck all players who were logged in, including Ryo.

"This feels a lot like when I'm in close synchronization with my Avatar," Kuhn said out loud, as he desperately tried to make sense of what had happened.

"That is a moment of intense concentration," Pi argued. "But our Avatars aren't out. We've lost the sensation of our physical selves for too long. This isn't limited to us, either. All the players are suffering from the same problem!"

"But I..." Ryo's voice had elevated to screaming. "I should be looking at a display. Where is the real Ryo Misaki?!"

His being, his soul, had been wrenched from its physical body and was screaming out in agony.

"Calm down," said a calm and collected voice.

A Macabre Dancer dressed in flame-colored attire appeared from the elevator.

"Yata!" Pi welcomed her superior. Pi was an engineer of CC Corp, and Yata was her superior within that organization. Yata

sometimes reminded Ryo of a Buddhist priest because of the clothes his PC wore.

The Guild Master of Raven was an elusive man. He was responsible for Project G.U..

“We will make an analysis based on what we know now. That should let us understand the current situation better,” Yata said.

Ryo didn't trust this intense man. Yata had revealed to him that part of their research into AIDA included watching Nanao Shino on her sick bed. Even if it was for research, that didn't mean it was justified. Ryo didn't understand what this man was thinking, and he certainly didn't want Yata to see him when he was so uncontrolled. Overcoming his anxiety, Ryo glared at the Macabre Dancer.

“What's going on?” Ryo demanded from Yata.

“All the players who are currently logged into *The World* can no longer log-out from the server.”

“What?!”

For a moment, as the reality of Yata's words sunk in, Ryo lost his composure.

“None of the players can perceive their bodies in the real world. They cannot communicate outside of *The World*.”

“Our souls got sucked in an online game?!” Pi yelled. She normally trusted Yata implicitly, but he was talking about the impossible. This was too much for her to accept.

“Pi... You should be feeling that you are part of the game-world now. Are you saying that you're not real?” Yata asked, completely composed.

"But...!"

"Reality is nothing but a construct you create in your mind," Yata stated, very calmly challenging the way humanity interpreted reality. It was like watching a cult leader preach.

"Nothing is impossible..." Ryo had begun to accept this unreal situation.

It wasn't logical. He had no experience with this. All he had to go by was gut instinct.

His will had become a beast, hunting down truth as its prey. He was already prepared to step outside the boundaries of accepted doctrine.

Nothing will make me deny Shino's existence!

He wasn't going to let anything get in the way of his goal.

Nanao Shino had fallen unconscious because of something in *The World*, and now Atoli was lost, too.

"Good! Discard your prejudices, everyone." Yata clapped his hands.

The information windows all closed at once. The Serpent of Lore, which had been filled with the screams of fear and rage from the players, suddenly felt silent again.

"Is this AIDA too?" Ryo needed clarification from Yata. "They've rerouted the commands—"

"It is worse than that." Yata replied.

"So we are all Lost Ones now?" Kuhn offered.

This thought jolted through Ryo's brain like a burst of electricity.

Lost Ones—that meant that he was currently sitting at his desk in his room on the second floor of his home, unconscious—just like Shino. It wasn't just him, though; it was all the players.

"How long has it been like this?" Ryo tried to think back. He tried to remember how long it had been since he had felt the controller in his hand.

"Everything was normal until... the Lost Ground... at Morrigu Barrow Wall, when Tri-Edge's sign transported us."

"When we escaped from the coin lockers, we were already like this?"

Pi and Kuhn both groaned. That meant that the abnormality had started when they were in the coin locker area.

"Atoli?"

"PC Atoli is still lost," Yata answered as he touched the control panel of the Serpent of Lore.

If this is the doing of the AIDA, then Tri-Edge must be caught up in it as well.

Azure Kite: He'd been in the coin locker area as well. Tri-Edge had definitely been at the scene.

"This anomaly started at the exact time the black AIDA arms appeared from the coin lockers," Kuhn inferred.

Ryo was retracing his steps in his mind. What he needed to do couldn't be done there anymore. He turned to leave...

"Wait. You can't act alone!" Pi stopped him.

"My enemy is the AIDA. I'm an Epitaph User... I have an Avatar. That should level the playing field," Haseo said with confidence.

He also needed spirit.

When people have something worth saving, they become stronger. Ovan had told him that once. Haseo wasn't going to lose again. He didn't want to be defeated ever again.

"Haseo... You mustn't be overconfident!"

"I know. This is all because of overconfidence!"

Haseo took in Kuhn's advice and then turned to leave the Serpent of Lore.

"He's like a wild dog. Yata watched Haseo leave with a wry smile on his face. He then ordered Pi and Kuhn to collect data. He turned back to the Serpent of Lore to gather from that fountain of wisdom.



TWO

Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

Atoli had been taken by the AIDA.

I can't blame her. She didn't ask for any of this.

This shouldn't have happened.

Ryo felt responsible for Atoli being lost. It had been his fault.

At the same time, he had an increasing distrust of Ovan. After all, it was Ovan who had suggested Atoli go off on her own during Haseo's crowning at Hy Brasail, the Isle of Kings.

>>DO YOU KNOW OF TRI-EDGE? THE THREE-PRONGED MARK THAT HASEO'S BEEN SEARCHING FOR?

YES...

>>HE'S LOOKING FOR TRI-EDGE. AND YOU CAN HELP HIM, WITH YOUR AUDIO ABILITY.

MY AUDIO ABILITY?

>>IF YOU CAN DO WHAT SHINO COULDN'T, THEN HASEO WILL BE SURE TO APPRECIATE YOU.

Atoli had the ability to hear AIDA. Ovan knew that. He had played on Atoli's emotions. It would have been easy for a man like Ovan to trick a young, self-conscious girl like Atoli into doing things like joining the religious guild of Moon Tree. Ryo had put his faith in Ovan. Even now, Ryo wanted to trust Ovan. Haseo wanted to look up to him. He was supposed to help Haseo get Shino back. Haseo felt so hurt during that half-year when Shino had been gone, but Ovan hadn't been there for him.

Why can't Ovan help? Why can't he fight with me?

Haseo felt like an abandoned child. He still couldn't disobey his superiors. Why? Perhaps because Haseo didn't have the qualification to stand beside Ovan.

>>I DON'T WANT TO ALWAYS BE IN SECOND. OR THIRD. OR WHATEVER PLACE! I WANT PEOPLE TO CARE ABOUT ME! NOBODY CARES A THING ABOUT ME IN THE REAL WORLD! THEY WON'T EVEN LOOK AT ME!

Those final words still pained Ryo.

He had someone who could never be replaced. But that didn't mean that person felt he was irreplaceable too.

The revelations had knocked him for a loop. The same thought could be applied to Ovan. It also applied to his feelings for Shino. She was more than just a guild member in the Twilight Brigade. Ryo Misaki had met her in real life in Ikebukuro one winter day. All he wanted was to be the older girl's lover—someone irreplaceable to her. Since he'd started having those feelings, his life had been full of pain, impulse, and an unrivaled uncertainty. He didn't have anything. He was empty. It was because no one needed him. He couldn't save anyone.

He felt hollow.

That's why I needed power.

Levels and a power meter were needed, if he was to be irreplaceable.

Avatars.

The Terror of Death, Skeith—that was the power he sought. A power that linked the player's senses to their PC. A power that

could defeat Tri-Edge, control the AIDA, and rescue Shino... A power that could mean the salvation of Ryo's world.

But...

I made Endrance into a Lost One...

At the title match in Demon Palace, Ryo had cut off something important to the AIDA-PC Emperor Endrance with Skeith. He could still remember how it felt, cutting the strings of life from another.

>>YOU MUSTN'T USE YOUR AVATAR AGAINST
A PC. THAT WOULD MAKE YOU NO DIFFERENT
FROM TRI-EDGE, WHOM YOU HATE SO MUCH.

Haseo recalled Kuhn's warning: *The power I gained to save is also a power to cause pain...*

Haseo had committed a crime.

The center of this power, Data Drain, didn't discriminate between right and wrong. An Avatar was made of the same substance as AIDA. It was the power that inhabits the alternate reality of *The World*. Depending on who used it, it could be wicked or divine.

Ryo's heart was full of remorse. He felt anguished when he recalled the tragedies that had occurred when Endrance and Atoli had come in contact with the AIDA, not to mention the party he'd played in that.

I...

He stopped.

Ryo didn't have a display or a controller now. He walked as a PC, as if that were his own physical body. It was just like Pi and Kuhn had said: This was the closest feeling to the moment an Avatar appeared. However, it wasn't exactly the same. There was something imprecise about the connection.

My movements are slow?

His reactions were slower. It was a sensation, but he felt that Haseo's motions were a little delayed compared to Ryo's mind. It was almost like lag.

"HEY! YOU!" someone yelled out.

Floating in Mac Anu's harbor was a steam-powered sailboat. Ryo remembered seeing this boat before. He'd ridden on to get to Hy Brasail. It had only been a few hours earlier.

"You gotta be kidding me! I can't log-out?!"

Standing on the deck was an excited Twin Blade with a topknot. Ryo also remembered this PC. He had been one of PK Bordeaux's henchmen and was a member of Kestrel.

Negimaru...

Negimaru was probably on the boat on his way back from making mischief at the crowning ceremony.

"I won't be quiet! Crap! Crap! Crap! Where is this?! I'm in a game. Yeah?! A game?!" Negimaru blubbered. He was swinging his sword frantically.

The blue-clothed GMs stationed to give information to players approached him to discipline Negimaru for his behavior.

However, what unfolded was completely unprecedented:

Negimaru pushed the tip of his sword toward one of the GMs and the GM suddenly collapsed.

Hub?!

Haseo ran toward the boat. His mind was racing.

He sunk down to his knees when he got to the ashen body lying on the deck. This GM wasn't going to get up again.

What...?! What's going on?! Ryo was bewildered.

This was illegal in two ways: Firstly, GM characters were programmed so they couldn't be PKed. Secondly, it was impossible to PK in Root Towns.

The area erupted into screaming chaos.

The passengers reacted as if there were a random slasher among them. They scrambled to reach the pier. They were no longer aware of their real selves. They had no controller or display. The players had their souls thrown from their real bodies into this world, and they had probably done all they could to keep calm, but this was enough to throw them into total panic.

Common sense was dead.

The rules that made this place a game were now gone. This was a lawless land. The place where their souls had come to, *The World*, was like purgatory. The only guarantee now was fear.

Negimaru had broken the dam. Now he blocked the way of one PC who had temporarily lost it while fleeing. Negimaru thrust his sword toward this new target.

The PC yelped in fear.

“Bo?!”

The young Shadow Warlock with the crescent-shaped hat was also known to Haseo. Bo must also be on his way back from the coronation.

“Answer me, kid! I’ll kill you! Do you know who I am?! I’m...”

“STOP!” Haseo called out from behind Negimaru just before he made good on his threats.

“Haseo!” Bo managed to utter weakly.

“Hah...? Haseo!”

Negimaru visibly shrunk back when he turned round to see Haseo glaring at him.

This was bad luck. Even if this was an online game, Ryo could feel the fear. This wasn’t a PK. Ryo could sense true murderous intent coming from Negimaru now.

“HASEO! You’re here! After those dirty tricks in the arena... You’re a cheat!” Negimaru was mad.

“What?!”

“How could a low-level like you beat Bordeaux?! It was an instant kill! You must have cheated! What did you do?! You must have had a GM help you! You and Endrance are nothing but cheaters!” Negimaru spurted out verbal abuse while he waved his sword at Haseo. His eyes were full of malice.

“You’re nuts!”

“You’re a disgrace! You’re lower than crap.” Negimaru walked closer to Haseo. His eyes looked bloodshot.

Haseo automatically tried to step back.

This was *The World* but it also wasn't *The World*. Because of the AIDA, all the premises of an online game had fallen away. The players could no longer log-out. This was reality now. So why did Ryo feel any different than being threatened in a gloomy Ikebukuro bathroom by some knife-wielding low-level gangster looking for money? If the blades cut him, he'd probably feel pain. He might die just like the gray-faced GM lying on the deck. Ryo was just a high school student. A dispute in a game shouldn't threaten to end his life. Negimaru was no longer a PK looking for valuable items. He was simply a man thrusting a knife at Haseo.

My Avatar...

Haseo had no choice but to fight back.

But if I use my Avatar...

In the back of his mind, he could see Endrance lying unconscious on a hospital bed. If Haseo used his Avatar, then there was a possibility that Negimaru's player could become a Lost One too.

Doubt clouded his thoughts.

While Haseo was unfocussed, he couldn't make Skeith appear. Haseo stood motionless.

Negimaru's blades pushed toward Haseo's chest.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!"

A voice like a chime stopped Negimaru in his tracks.

Ryo looked to see the new PC who had entered the fray.

"Sakaki?" Ryo muttered in disbelief.

"You're Moon Tree Guild's..." Negimaru groaned.



This newcomer was one of the leaders of the Moon Tree Guild, which was the biggest rival power to Kestrel. His name was Sakaki. He was a magnificent sight, with his long coat over his armor.

“To threaten or intimidate another player is against the End User License Agreement...”

Sakaki had moved so that he stood before Sakubo defensively.

“Sh-shut the hell up! Are you an idiot! Do you think that End User License Agreement means anything now?!”

“You are now violating the clauses regarding mutual respect during gameplay,” Sakaki was persistent.

“You jerk! Jerk! Jerk! Jerk! Jerk! Jerk! Sakaki is a JERK!” Negimaru spitted out this fresh verbal onslaught. It sounded like an audio file had corrupted.

“In real life or in an online game, morals and respect for other people’s rights are the same.” Sakaki sounded like he despised every inch of Negimaru.

Sakaki raised his hand. From below deck appeared a Macabre Dancer with two fans and a young man with a bayonet.

“Ngh! Matsu, Hiiragi?!” Negimaru clearly hadn’t anticipated this. Now that he was surrounded by three Moon Tree Guild members, he turned very pale.

“Ohhh, I remember you! You’re a Kestrel PK,” said the young man called Hiiragi, punching his fist into his other hand.

“Oh my! One of Bordeaux’s! I heard that they lost at the arena and were expelled.” Hiiragi, the Macabre Dancer, giggled. His appearance was masculine, but he spoke like a girl. The clothes that the player had

chosen for his PC were fairly revealing. He acted like a player who had clearly chosen to play a different role for his online life.

"I want you to help me maintain law and order in the town," Sakaki calmly said.

"The system isn't going to do anything now. Stupid pacifists! Nothing better than religious freaks! Scared now?!" Negimaru tried to protest, but he was no match for Sakaki.

"Please... As a member of humanity—"

"Ugh..." Negimaru faltered. Perhaps Sakaki's words had rung a chord inside him, but Negimaru was suddenly as miserable as an extinguished candle.

"To bully others only reveals your own self-doubt. You can't find any other way to convey your feelings, so you only have childish threats left to you."

Negimaru looked away from everyone. He was shrinking away.

"Aaaaaahhhh!"

Before Sakaki could finish himself off, Negimaru had fled.

What was that?

Perhaps that was all it took to disturb someone who was already terrified. Negimaru was acting like he would commit murder given the chance, but it hadn't taken much to break him. Ryo was bewildered.

"The smallest dogs always bark the loudest," Matsu said as they all watched Negimaru disappear from the pier.

"Yes, Hiiragi. However, this is an unusual situation. It is exactly as the message from HQ stated. Is it not surprising that the players are panicked," Sakaki said.

It seemed that the members of Moon Tree who were logged into *The World* were already aware of the situation and knew that they could no longer perceive their real-world bodies. To stay calm in this situation indicated a great presence of mind.

“Haseo!” Now that the tension had dispersed, Bo felt confident enough to call out to Haseo.

“Bo, are you all right?”

“Yeah. I being okay!” Bo shouted. He couldn’t make the words properly. “Hey! Hey! I can’t log-out! Where I am? I’m not anywhere! Ahhhh! Ah!”

The strange situation would of course be more distressing for the younger players. All that Ryo could manage was a muttered, “It’ll be okay,” to reassure him.

“Is this also affecting you, Fear of Death?” Sakaki called Haseo by his second PKK name.

“Yeah, I could have been better,” Ryo said, belittling himself. However, such sarcasm didn’t work with Moon Tree.

“Oi, Haseo...” It didn’t look like Moon Tree was going to forgive disrespect toward Sakaki, though. Hiiragi was ready to lash out at Haseo.

“What?! Are you Sakaki’s puppy now?” Haseo was likening Sakaki’s group to Bordeaux’s.

“WHAT?!”

“Tee hee... Matsu, he’s not worth it. But don’t you think it’s cute that he’s all stubborn even now? Just what you’d imagine a PKK that’s killed a hundred players. I wonder when he’ll start to pray.”

Hiiragi started to giggle now, too. Ryo was now starting to wonder if the reason they were all so relaxed was that they had a screw loose to begin with.

“He may be arena Emperor, but he’s still not grown-up inside.” Sakaki sounded disappointed. He cut himself off. He’d noticed something.

“Hm?”

“I understand. I will do that.” Someone who wasn’t here had sent Sakaki a personal message, evidently. Sakaki answered and then turned back to Haseo.

“Will you come to Moon Guilds @HOME? Please, Haseo?”

“What?” Haseo didn’t understand Sakaki’s invitation at first.

“To meet our Guild Master, Zelkova.”

Ryo certainly hadn’t expected this.



THREE

The moon shone bright and clear.

The silver light that came through the clouds reflected off the roof tiles. Surrounding the main building were corridors and a five-tiered pagoda that represented the five elements—earth, fire, air, water, and wind. A brazier burned in the middle of the Oriental garden.

This was Moon Tree Guild’s @HOME..



Δ SETTING ETERNITY'S NIGHT MOON

From the summerhouse where the transport terminal was located, they walked down a corridor to reach the center. Ryo had a chance to look around.

The BGM was set to traditional Japanese music. The sound team at CC Corp had created Moon Tree's BGM especially for them. Large guilds that had a high rank would be granted special settings for use in their @HOME. Only Moon Tree and Kestrel qualified for these sorts of special privileges.

"I think you understand this already, but we didn't bring you here to fight," Pi warned Haseo as she walked alongside him.

"Sure, sure," Haseo grumbled.

"Pi, stop over-thinking everything. Do you think that Haseo would have messaged us if he wanted to fight?" Kuhn tried to mediate.

"When conversing on enemy territory, we have to think of these things. That's just common sense."

When Ryo had been invited to meet the Guild Master of Moon Tree, he had let G.U. know, even though they probably already had the information.

"Haseo likes playing solo. He wouldn't do that," Kuhn observed.

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that this is the founder of Moon Tree."

He must really be some PC if Atoli had faith in him. Haseo didn't want to think that she had made a mistake.

"Yata sent a mail to Zelkova as Guild Master of Raven. He told him that our purpose is to recruit Moon Tree's help in ascertaining a reason for those players currently logged in being trapped in *The World*. Of course, I will speak so as not to reveal G.U." Pi was going to do all the diplomatic work here.

"It was the Guild Master of Moon Tree who wanted me here," Haseo said.

"That is what I don't understand..." Pi pondered.

"Haseo isn't very good at picking fights," Kuhn said, as if to lighten the mood. Perhaps it wasn't just Sakaki, who had ties with Atoli. Perhaps the whole of Moon Tree wanted to know.

"You are good at making others hold grudges. But I'll tell you this now: Moon Tree's Zelkova and Kestrel's Gabi... Both of the Guild Masters of *The World*'s two largest guilds have demonstrated an interest in you, Haseo. Even if they're only interested in you as an Epitaph User, I'm not sure why you have managed to generate this much attention," Kuhn added.

Haseo didn't have anything to say to that.

"You're always too careful!" It was Pi's turn to chastise Kuhn.

"G.U. has to be careful so as to avoid creating too many problems for CC Corp!"

Ryo sighed.

“You made it public that you were an Epitaph User. You don’t want to be an obstacle in the understanding of the AIDA phenomenon and the Lost Ones. I’ll do the talking. You two just follow me.” Just as Pi finished, a PC appeared from the main building.

It was a girl in a kimono. The PC design was of a woman in her mid-twenties, but she acted much older. You often saw all the male PC designs range from child to old man, but you rarely saw any older female PC designs because there were very few players who wanted to play that.

“Welcome to Moon Tree. I am Kaede.”

Kaede was exceedingly graceful. She was a member of the Seven Counsel. As she entered the hall, she made a bowing motion. Then, she proceeded to tell Haseo and the others about Moon Tree’s @HOME. Kaede’s player had obviously spent some time in the setting functions to make her PC appear more mature...

They proceeded to one of the back rooms.

The light from the lanterns flickered as they passed.

In the middle of the rock garden, six paving stones were placed in two lines. This was where the Seven Counsel met.

“Let me introduce you. This is the Seven Counsel. First Division Captain Zelkova. Second Division Captain Sakaki. I, Kaede, am Third Division Captain. This is Fourth Division Captain Nala. Fifth Division Captain Hiiragi. Sixth Division Captain Sophora. And there is Seventh Division Captain Matsu. These are the Seven Counsel of Moon Tree,” Kaede’s voice rung out in the night air.

Haseo now understood from Kaede's introduction that Moon Tree was split into seven divisions and each of them had a Seven Counsel member as the captain. There were faces among the group that he knew. On the right and furthest back, there was Sakaki. On the left and furthest back, was Kaede, with whom Haseo was also familiar. In the middle, he knew the feminine-sounding Macabre Dancer, Hiiragi. Standing in front of Hiiragi was Matsu. He probably wouldn't be able to remember all these PCs at once, but he should at least remember Kaede, Sakaki, and the Guild Master.

In the back was a small shrine-like building. In there was placed a single stone slab. Sitting on it was a PC who occupied the highest level of Moon Tree.

"Uwaaah! It's Haseo!" Zelkova let out a child-like yelp of joy. He was a Guild Master like no other—a young-boy PC who couldn't be older than three. All the Seven Counsel members were wearing clothes reminiscent of the Warring States period. Zelkova was the only one dressed all in white. He looked like a god from Japanese legend, stepping out from the shrine. At first glance, the boy looked like a Harvest Cleric, but on his hip hung a large sickle, which marked him as a Flick Reaper. On top of his head were horns. They looked like they were from a fawn.

Zelkova bounded over to Haseo.

"It's the real thing! I'm meeting the arena's Emperor! This is marvelous! Zelkova looked up at Haseo with the same mix of respect and amazement as a child would have upon meeting their favorite sports figure. He was absolutely enthralled with Haseo.

“Zelkova!” Kaede admonished him as a mother would.

Zelkova seemed to jolt back to reality, and with a little jog, he hurried back to his seat.

“Well... Everyone, hello! ♪ Haseo, welcome!” He returned to the childish demeanor he’d used in his greeting.

Kaede sighed as she looked around.

“That’s enough,” Sakaki said, clearly trying to hold back his frustration. “We can handle the small jobs, for as long as Zelkova needs us to do so.”

“Aren’t you saying then that we can operate Moon Tree even if Zelkova isn’t here, Sakaki?” Kaede argued.

“No, I’m not. Zelkova is the important symbol of Moon Tree...” Sakaki stated, then silently fumed at Kaede.

>> GUILD OPERATIONS OF MOON TREE ARE RUN BY THE SECOND IN COMMAND. SAKAKI.

Pi told Haseo about the situation using party chat. Only Haseo and Kuhn were able to hear it. It must have been public knowledge that Zelkova was nothing more than decoration in the guild.

Moon Tree is divided into those loyal to Zelkova and those loyal to Sakaki?

“Haseo! ♪” Zelkova turned to Haseo. He was behaving as if he didn’t feel the tension there, and he certainly seemed incapable of realizing that his behavior was problematic.

“What?” Haseo looked at Zelkova. He couldn’t tell if the player was acting like himself or taking on a role.

"Haseo, you were a newcomer to the arena, right? But you won and became Emperor! That's so amazing! I watched the title match!"

Zelkova must have been in the arena too then. Ryo wasn't used to praise, so he felt uncomfortable.

"Why are you so excited? Don't you think it was just a lucky win?" Matsu grumbled about the results of the title match between Haseo and Endrance. He was standing closest to Haseo.

Haseo said nothing.

"Oi... I see that you're honest at least," Matsu said, shrugging his shoulders when Ryo didn't reply.

"Don't start wagging your tail, puppy. You must be the weakest of the Seven Counsel," Ryo spat back. Matsu had no right to be talking about what had happened between himself and Endrance.

"What?! You brat!"

"Matsu..." Sakaki stopped the impatient Matsu.

The air in the meeting had turned even thicker. Pi had lost her chance for diplomacy, but now she took a step forward to try and recover the situation. "The Guild Master of Raven, Yata, sent a mail. Have you had a chance to read it?"

"Sure! ♪"

"Yes, we received it," Kaede quickly replied after Zelkova's flippant answer.

"Good. So this system anomaly which has hit *The World*—" Pi started.

"We can no longer log-out from *The World*," Sakaki finished off and narrowed his lips.

"It's not just that. Everyone has also lost the sensation of their real selves. It as if *The World* has sucked in our souls."

"Whoa, like some kind of occult magic. But everyone's involved. And it is only a game." Hiiragi may have been speaking straight from the player, but he still didn't drop the feminine speech patterns... and he didn't sound stressed.

"I don't think this is a system anomaly. I think the anomaly is something else. Pi-kun, isn't that right? What do you know? Is there something that you're not telling us?" Sakaki probed.

"What do you mean?" Pi looked straight back.

"Hmm. Fine. Anyway, we have to stop the players from panicking." Sakaki said, smoothly turning the conversation back to its original purpose. It almost sounded as if he were reading from a script, sometimes.

"Um... exactly," Pi agreed. Now that those who should be managing the system were powerless, it was a bit of a joke that normal players like Sakaki, who didn't even know about the AIDA phenomenon, had to step in to fix things.

"Anyway, Haseo-kun: Have you seen Atoli?" Sakaki asked. He had been to Hy Brasail too. He must have not seen her, either.

"I was going to ask you that," Haseo muttered. Hearing her name spoken out loud was like a pin stabbing into Ryo's heart.

"Atoli had gone to celebrate your coronation, right? Did you speak with each other? What did she say?" Sakaki asked.

They had met. They had spoken. Ryo knew why she wasn't here too.

"Moon Tree can't help with this matter." Ryo stiffened up.

"Hmm? Do you understand the anomaly, Haseo-kun?"

"I know more than you do, Sakaki. We need to deviate from the norm. This isn't a problem which Moon Tree can solve by enforcing the End User License Agreement," Haseo started to rant.

Pi yelled at him in the party chat before he was let slip anything about AIDA.

Ryo fell silent now.

"Do you have some kind of abnormal power then? You're very arrogant to be so proud of your own strength," Sakaki said in a pitiful tone.

"Let's speak plainly, Pi." Zelkova now got involved. He had been listening to the conversation with interest.

"Huh?" Pi didn't know what to expect now.

"Will you cooperate with us so that we can escape this AIDA server, members of G.U.?"

Pi, Kuhn, and Haseo all took a deep intake of breath.

Zelkova had said laid everything out very plainly.

He knows about AIDA? He knows about G.U.?

How did Zelkova know this?

The meeting fell silent. Everyone seemed to need to take some time to absorb the gravity of the Guild Master's words.

"Zelkova, what is 'AIDA'?" Matsu queried.

"AIDA server? What's that?" Hiiragi was also puzzled.

"What is this?" Pi finally managed an answer.

“AIDA deviates from the norms of *The World*. Pi is a system administrator. She has been hired by CC Corp to investigate the AIDA. Right?”

Pi was totally at a loss for words now.

Hey! He knows everything!

Haseo shrugged.

“Zelkova? I don’t understand any of this. Why didn’t you tell the Seven Counsel?” Sakaki questioned his Guild Master. He wasn’t happy to have been kept in the dark.

“Hmm? Sakaki, are you mad?”

“Sakaki! I don’t know the details either, but I’m sure Zelkova had his reasons,” Kaede stepped in to defend Zelkova.

I see. The Zelkova faction and the Sakaki faction... Zelkova’s faction had Kaede and Sakaki’s faction has the girly Hiiragi and obedient Matsu. What about the other two?

Ryo looked at the sixth division’s captain. He examined the PC who had a rod and hat. He looked like an itinerant Buddhist priest.

He’s Sophora. Which side is he on? He hasn’t said a word.

Ryo then looked at the fourth division captain. He had the appearance of an elderly man. He was a Lord Partisan.

And this is Nala.

“Well, well...” Finally, Nala spoke out. Everyone turned their attention to Nala. “This is not the time to be fighting amongst ourselves. We all have our own opinions but our cause in Moon Tree is the same... Am I wrong?” The old man’s words struck a chord

with them and the place fell quiet.

"You're right," Kaede said.

"The beliefs symbolized by the flag of Moon Tree are true," Sakaki added.

Both Kaede and Sakaki composed themselves.

Nala seems to be in the middle.

Nala was playing a large role in keeping the two factions from fighting.

"Let's work together! We can get off this AIDA server if we help each other! ♪"

Zelkova's words seemed to be the consensus of Moon Tree now.

"There are no objections to Zelkova's decision?" Nala asked. The Seven Counsel members all nodded.

"G.U., right?" Sakaki turned back to Haseo's party. "Well, Moon Tree will follow your orders, then. I believe that we will not regret cooperating. Of course, the information regarding G.U. will not leave this place."

"Thank you." Pi's gratitude was genuine. She had been outmaneuvered by both Sakaki and Zelkova.



FOUR

Raven @ HOME Serpent of Lore

Haseo, Raven, and Pi returned to the Serpent of Lore and reported the contents of their meeting with Moon Tree to Yata.

"How does Zelkova's player know about AIDA and G.U.?!"
Pi couldn't hold back her shock. As a CC Corp staff member, she must have been feeling even more agitated than Ryo by this turn of events.

"Thanks for everything, old woman," Haseo grumbled.

"Haseo!" Pi objected.

"Well, I think it was a good thing we met with them," Kuhn said to soothe Pi's rage.

"Zelkova spoke of an AIDA server?" Yata opened his fan and looked thoughtful, as if he were a *shogi* player, contemplating his next move.

"Yata, do you know about Zelkova?"

"Of course I know about the Guild Master of Moon Tree," Yata answered. "From the information we have now, I suspect that this world we're in now is no longer *The World*."

"This isn't *The World*? What do you mean?" Ryo asked.

Yata summarized what had happened up until now: "After the AIDA incident, which occurred in the coin locker area, all the PCs who were logged in could no longer log-out. On top of this, none of the players can perceive their real bodies anymore. No PCs can log-in, either. Currently, there is no way of contacting the outside."

"Our souls have been sucked into an online game." Pi sounded like she still couldn't accept it, as it went against all reason.

"We are Epitaph Users; our minds are linked to our PCs and to the game. What if there was some illegal interference from the AIs to the players' minds?" Pi was desperately trying to apply logic to the situation. It was her way.

"Then all logged in players will be infected?" Kuhn said.

"Not infected. We have not been compromised by AIDA," Yata reassured. "However, if this situation has happened—"

"Ah..."

"This cannot be the result of a localized data infection. This is an AIDA phenomenon on a server level. This is a problem of perception."

Perception... We have left our bodies and been trapped in an online game. Is that what the AIDA wants us to think?

"There has been lots of trouble breaking out amongst players in the town." Kuhn sounded concerned. "The GMs don't know anything about the AIDA, and they can't allay the players' fears. Kestrel's in the middle of all the fighting. Moon Tree's control hasn't crumbled though, and they are maintaining some order."

The only players that were keeping their cool in this situation were those with the strongest presence of mind. Kestrel were now running wild and free, and Moon Tree were acting as a force to maintain the rules.

If AIDA gets into people's minds...

Ryo recalled the image of Endrance playing with his cat. What was AIDA trying to prove to the people on this server?

"They might not be trying to prove anything to us. They might be watching us," Yata said mysteriously.

“What?”

“At least we know that this anomaly has been caused by the AIDA. It is now of great urgency that we investigate matters, so we can return to reality.”

“We need to get back to reality!” Pi and Kuhn both sighed.

“There is one final important matter,” Yata said. He had something terrible to reveal.

The Serpent of Lore played video back. In the window, there were the ashen bodies of PCs who'd been defeated in battles with ordinary monsters or who had been PKed. The GM who had been PKed by Negimaru at Mac Anu harbor was also there.

“None of the PCs who have died since the server changed have rezzed.”

Ryo was speechless.

“No one has resurrected. We have no way of finding out what happened to the players in the real world. We have to prepare ourselves for the worst,” Yata continued.

“You mean that if they die on the server, then they're dead in real life too?” Ryo could barely believe it.

“I don't know. But I can't deny that that is a possibility.”

No one could argue with Yata.

“The Kestrel PKs are increasing the panic!” Kuhn screamed in rage.

Pi went pale. Even GMs could be PKed. The AIDA server was completely lawless.

History had taught humanity that when people are stuck in a hopeless situation, their morals would evaporate. This was no exception. It was a massacre.

“Atoli...” Ryo uttered her name without thinking.

He’d only realized his feelings after he’d lost her. It felt the same regarding Shino. He should have appreciated her more.

Pi seemed to come back to herself at this change of subject. “Could the reason that the AIDA took her center around her Morganna Factor?”

“Morganna Factor?” Ryo hadn’t heard these words before.

Pi clapped her hand over her mouth. She hadn’t meant to let that nugget of information slip out. She looked over at Yata for help.

“I think we can tell Haseo now,” Yata prompted Pi to explain.

“So what is it?” Haseo asked Pi again.

“Morganna Factor is the data inside an Epitaph User that gives them their ability,” Pi answered.

“Data? Are you saying that this factor is inside the PC?” Ryo looked at his PC again. “Epitaph User... You mean ‘epitaph’?” Ryo had been using the word without questioning where it had come from. Now he started thinking about what the word meant.

“Epitaph-PCs are special player characters created that were created during a project of CC Corp.”

“And? Just spit it out.”

“It’s top secret.”

“Huh?”

“Epitaph-PCs are not ordinary PCs. They have a piece of data inside them called a Morganna Factor.”

In one of the information windows, the word “Morganna” appeared. This Morganna Factor data was recorded in Epitaph-PCs Haseo, Pi, and Kuhn.

“Morganna Factor is also known as an Epitaph,” Kuhn continued the explanation.

Epitaphs and Morganna Factors were the same thing, only with different names. Because PC Haseo had the Morganna Factor resident in his PC data, he could summon an Avatar. This made him an Epitaph User. The Epitaph could translate a person’s mind into the Internet, creating an Avatar. It was like a phrase from a spell.

If this is a program, then the developer must be an amazing person.

It was an achievement that blurred the lines between science and philosophy.

“The Epitaph is a black box that links our PCs with our minds.”

Ryo didn’t understand what Pi was saying, but he didn’t have the energy to ask more questions.

“Hey, hey. Don’t worry! I didn’t understand it at first either.” Kuhn smiled.

“I really don’t know where to even begin with this.”

“You’ll get by.” Kuhn smiled again.

Kuhn had been just another ordinary player, like Ryo. He had been discovered as an Epitaph-PC. He was scouted as a Chosen One by CC Corp and joined G.U..

"You're just a part-timer," Pi said.

Kuhn choked. To be bossed around by Pi, who was a staff member, was a bit galling to Kuhn. Ryo could sympathize.

Pi continued with her explanation: "There are eight Morganna Factors."

"Eight... Does that mean that they're eight Epitaph-PCs?" Haseo queried.

"There are several players who are considered qualified for Epitaphs, but the maximum number of PCs who can hold these Epitaphs is eight. Each of the eight Epitaphs have their own names." Pi paused. She was concentrating. From her two hands came forth her Avatar. Pi was a Tribal Grappler, and her Avatar looked like a giant beast claw. "My Epitaph is called 'The Avenger,' and my Avatar's name is Tarvos."

"My Epitaph is titled 'The Propagation' and my Avatar is called Magus." Kuhn held a multi-angled club.

"Mine is 'The Fear of Death' and the Avatar, Skeith." Ryo held up his terrifying sickle.

"The same name as your PKK. Kinda sick," Pi grumbled.

Ryo hadn't chosen the name out of thin air. The Internet rumors had given him that label. When he had awakened as an Epitaph User, it just seemed like a natural choice.

"After it lost 'The Temptress' Epitaph carried by Endrance, who had Macha, the AIDA may have gone after Atoli because they thought she was the candidate for 'The Mirage of Deceit' and the host for Innis."

“The AIDA know that we’re—”

“The AIDA are infecting people’s minds. It makes sense that the AIDA would be more interested in those who are Epitaph Users because their minds are already linked to their PC, right?” Pi followed the thread logically.

“We’re at risk,” Kuhn inferred.

There was a high possibility that the AIDA would go after other Epitaph Users in the future. Pi snapped that if it was only a part-time job to Kuhn, then he could quit if he wanted. It didn’t comfort Kuhn.

Yata gave his orders. “If you are not on duty, you are not to leave the Raven’s @HOME. The security here is perfect.”

“The Lost Ones? It’s starting to remind me of seven years ago,” Kuhn muttered to himself.

“Seven years ago?” Ryo asked.

“This.” Yata touched the control panel of the Serpent of Lore. He opened up a list of Haseo’s valuable items.

“These items? A file?”

“This is the Banshouya File,” Yata replied.

“Yata?! That’s...!” Pi cried out in desperation.

“Yes, top secret. But Haseo should read it.

There were four items in the Banshouya File. They were labeled one through four.

“Banshouya?”

“He was the man responsible for the founding of the G.U. Project. These are the notes he left. They are reports from the

Second Network Crisis, seven years ago. This is one of the few definitive sources we have regarding the Morganna incident,” Yata explained.

The 2005 First Network Crisis was called Pluto’s Kiss. Ryo had learnt about it in elementary school. All OS software and security systems were compromised and damaged by a virus. As a result, two years later, the civilian network was shut down.

The Second Network Crisis happened when Ryo was still in elementary school. He didn’t remember it well. He only remembered it being reported on the news and in the papers afterward. This was the first time he had heard the crisis called the “Morganna incident.”

“Read the files. Try and understand the contents,” Yata said.

He was a student who didn’t study, couldn’t be taught, and here Yata was commanding him to read.

Morganna Factor... Why is such a thing inside a computer game?

His questions always came to one thing: What was *The World*?

“And...” Yata waved his hand across the control panel. A sudden change started to encompass Haseo’s body.

In an instant, Haseo’s graphic had morphed. What appeared was a third form Adept Rogue, dressed all in black. It was the level-133 demon that had been the PKK Fear of Death.

“Job Extend?!”

“You need the levels, right? In the main menu, there is also a debug function added. If you select that, you’ll be invincible. Only against ordinary PCs and monsters, though,” Yata said.

This was the result of half a year's solid work. It had been snatched from him in a moment by Azure Kite.

Haseo had all his power back—and even more on top of that.

For them to approve this demon form was about more than levels; it meant that he was a confirmed member of G.U..

Idiot...

Haseo was overcome with emotion.



FIVE

CARPENTER FILE: FIRST INTERIM REPORT— INFECTION

THE WORLD IS AN ONLINE GAME.

THE USER ACCESSES THE GAME FROM A TERMINAL. THEY CREATE A CHARACTER. THEY EXPLORE THE GAME, MEETING OTHERS AND CHATTING WITH FRIENDS ALONG THE WAY. USERS CAN ALSO FORM COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE GAME AND EXCHANGE STRATEGY INFORMATION VIA E-MAIL AND ONLINE FORUMS. IT IS A GAME OF COMMUNICATION.

WHEN WRITING ABOUT *THE WORLD* AND PROJECT G.U., IT IS NECESSARY TO SPEAK OF THE SECOND NETWORK CRISIS, ALSO KNOWN AS THE MORGANNA INCIDENT. THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT IS BASED ON CC CORP'S INTERNAL INFORMATION, WHICH WAS OBTAINED

.hack // G.U.

THROUGH MY DUTIES AS A MEMBER OF G.U.. I WILL RECONSTRUCT WHAT HAPPENED, ACCORDING TO MY SUBJECTIVE VIEW. MY ACCOUNT WILL BE COMPLIMENTED BY LOGS, WHICH I FOUND LEFT ON THE NETWORK...

THE INCIDENT DATES BACK TO 2010.

THE STORY BEGINS WITH A BOY LOGGING INTO *THE WORLD* FOR THE FIRST TIME.

HE NAMED HIS PC KITE. THE PLAYER'S REAL NAME WILL BE OMITTED. HE WAS A FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD PLAYER. HE WAS INVITED BY A FRIEND WITH A PC CALLED ORCA. ORCA ACCOMPANIED HIM ON HIS FIRST ADVENTURE.

WHILE KITE AND ORCA WERE ADVENTURING, THEY CAME ACROSS A STRANGE YOUNG GIRL. HER NAME WAS AURA. A MYSTERIOUS MONSTER, SKEITH, WAS CHASING HER. AURA LEFT THEM WITH A BOOK, INSTALL BOOK, AND DISAPPEARED. HOWEVER, RIGHT AFTER THAT, THEY TOOK AN ILLEGAL BLOW FROM SKEITH, AND ORCA'S PC WAS LOST. FURTHERMORE, ORCA'S PLAYER ALSO FELL UNCONSCIOUS.

IT SOUNDS LIKE A SCIENCE FICTION STORY, BUT PLAYERS WERE FALLING INTO COMAS BECAUSE OF SOMETHING IN *THE WORLD*.

I WAS INVOLVED IN PROJECT G.U., SO IT WAS NOT OUT OF THE BOUNDS OF IMAGINATION TO ME. THE COMAS THAT WERE BEING CAUSED BY *THE WORLD* WERE NOT MADE PUBLIC. I AM ONLY AN ENGINEER AND THIS WAS OUT OF MY LEAGUE, BUT I COULD IMAGINE AN ORGANIZATION AS CORRUPT AS CC CORP WOULD HAVE NO QUALMS IN USING THE NECESSARY POLITICAL PRESSURE TO SUPPRESS THIS TERRIFYING INFORMATION. THERE WERE AT LEAST SIX VICTIMS, IF

AIDA SERVER

NOT MORE. THE SIX WERE PLAYERS NAMED SORA, ALF, CARL, KAZU, ORCA, AND SIEG. AT THE TIME OF THE INCIDENT, ONE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS—THE FIRST LOST ONE, TSUKASA. OUT OF THESE SIX PLAYERS, SORA AND SIEG WERE CLOSELY RELATED TO PROJECT G.U., BUT LET'S RETURN TO KITE'S STORY...

KITE WAS ABLE TO ESCAPE SKEITH'S THREAT, THANKS TO THE INTERVENTION OF HACKER HELBA, WHO TOOK THE INSTALL BOOK. WITH THIS, THE CHARACTER KITE WAS EXTENDED. THIS EXTENSION INCREASED HIS STRENGTH AND HE GAINED AN ILLEGAL POWER KNOWN AS DATA DRAIN... IRONICALLY, IT WAS THE SAME POWER THAT SKEITH HAD USED TO SEND HIS FRIEND, ORCA, INTO A COMA.

KITE RECEIVED A BRACELET SYMBOLIZING THE ILLEGAL POWER FROM THE MYSTERIOUS AURA. HE THEN BEGAN A QUEST TO SAVE HIS COMATOSE FRIEND, ORCA. ONE GIRL STAYED BY KITE'S SIDE AT ALL TIMES. HER CHARACTER'S NAME WAS BLACKROSE. SHE WAS THE REAL-WORLD SISTER OF KAZU, ONE OF THE COMA VICTIMS MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY. SHE WAS ALSO A NEWBIE WHO HAD LOGGED INTO *THE WORLD* TO SAVE HER BROTHER. THE TWO HAD A COMMON GOAL.

MANY PLAYERS GOT CAUGHT UP IN KITE'S BATTLE, INCLUDING A WAVEMASTER CALLED ELK, AN ILLEGAL CAT PC CALLED MIA, A DESCENDENT OF FIANNA CALLED BALMUNG WHO WAS VERY WELL KNOWN IN *THE WORLD*, AND THE STRONGEST HACKER ON THE NETWORK, HELBA.

KITE WAS FINALLY ABLE TO MEET AURA AGAIN, BUT SHE WAS IMMEDIATELY DELETED BY SKEITH. AURA'S DATA WAS SPLIT UP

AND SPREAD ACROSS *THE WORLD*. KITE HAD HIS FIRST BATTLE WITH SKEITH, AND FORTUNATELY, HE WAS ABLE TO SECURE A VICTORY. HE MUST NOT HAVE REALIZED WHAT A LONG JOURNEY WAS STILL AHEAD OF HIM, THOUGH.

I SHOULD ALSO SPEAK OF THE ORIGINAL CREATOR OF *THE WORLD*, THE GENIUS AI RESEARCHER, HARALD HOERWICK. THERE IS ALSO A MYSTERY SURROUNDING THE LOST INTERNET POEM, *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT...*

THE 2010 SECOND NETWORK CRISIS WAS CERTAINLY CAUSED BY *THE WORLD*. IT IS PROJECT G.U.'S DUTY TO STUDY WHAT EXACTLY IT WAS WITHIN *THE WORLD* THAT CAUSED THE GLOBAL ECONOMIES, TRANSPORT, COMMUNICATION, AND MEDICAL SYSTEMS TO SUFFER SO GREATLY.

IN OTHER WORDS, THE EXISTENCE UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED ACROSS THE NETWORK "GODS."

IT IS MY BELIEF THAT THIS TECHNICAL STUDY AND APPLICATION OF *THE WORLD* IS ACTUALLY THE STUDY OF A SPACE OCCUPIED BY GODS.

GRACELESS UNISON. THE HARMONY OF BEING ABANDONED BY THE GODS.

THIS IS THE STORY OF THESE CLUMSY BEINGS...



Haseo was stood in the hall of Raven's @HOME, reading the Banshouya File. He was horrified.

The video that accompanied the file was mind-blowing: The Banshouya File summarized the unusual happenings that occurred in *The World* during the Second Network Crisis.

The Second Network Crisis started from inside The World?

The crisis had resulted in massive stock market crashes, and the economy had recovered to its previous levels only recently. Japan alone had lost trillions upon trillions of yen. If Ryo was to believe the report, the cause of the crisis was something inside the online game, *The World*.

And seven years ago, people were falling unconscious for no reason!

In the previous version of *The World*, there had also been Lost Ones. What happened to Shino Nanao was also happening seven years ago. Jun Banshouya, who was the author of this file, was a senior engineer of CC Corp. This meant that CC Corp knew about the Lost Ones and had deliberately concealed it. To add insult to injury, they had continued to operate *The World* despite the known dangers.

This was not the end of the revelations in the video. The focus of Banshouya report was a PC called Kite.

Kite... He looks just like Tri-Edge.

Tri-Edge had clearly modeled his design on the PC Kite, right down to the weapon. Tri-Edge had also been using the name Azure Kite. It did cross Ryo's mind that Tri-Edge and Azure Kite might be the same person. It was probably not the case, but it was only natural to think that there must be some sort of connection.

Skeith...

A strange doll-like monster with a cross then appeared in the video. It was the same as Haseo's Avatar. This Skeith used Data Drain and made one of the players called Orca into a Lost One.

Mia, Endrance's cat!

There was also a cat called Mia who looked exactly like the AIDA that had infected Endrance.

He had seen the memories of Emperor Endrance's player in Avatar Space during the title match at the Demon Palace arena. The same cat-person had been in those fragmented memories. The cat PC in the video was that same cat PC with the large rabbit-like ears. The young Wavemaster called Elk was probably the Avatar that the player used in the previous *The World*, before Endrance.

Everything was connected.

Haseo was connected to the mysterious events of seven years ago, which were called the Morganna incident. It was all here in the Banshouya Files. Stories started new stories. However, the more Ryo understood, the more questions were raised, the more mysteries to solve. He was starting to reach the limits of his ability to comprehend things.

Banshouya Files...

Project G.U. was an anti-AIDA team, but originally it had been set up to research the causes of the Second Network Crisis.

Their aim...

"Gods...?"

Jun Banshouya referred to himself as an AI researcher, and he kept using the word "god" as if he were some scientist from the



middle ages. There were “gods” that resided in *The World*, and these gods governed *The World*. But he wasn’t some crazy medieval fanatic; this was the leading programmer of the day working at CC Corp!

Aura...

The mysterious girl who had entrusted Kite with a bracelet. Was this the Aura that Shino had talked about in Hulle Granz Cathedral? The goddess wasn’t just part of a background story to an MMO; she was a reality in *The World*.

Ryo opened the next file.

CARPENTER FILE: SECOND INTERIM REPORT— MUTATION

KITE DEFEATED SKEITH WITH THE POWER OF THE BRACELET, BUT INSTEAD OF SAVING HIS FRIEND ORCA, IT LED TO THE BIRTH OF AN EVEN DEADLIER ENEMY NAMED CUBIA.

KITE’S ACTIONS WERE SEEN AS DANGEROUS BY CC CORP’S ADMINISTRATOR AT THE TIME, LIOS. KITE ONLY WANTED TO SAVE HIS FRIEND. BUT, TO THOSE ADMINISTRATORS IN CHARGE OF PROTECTING *THE WORLD*, AND TO PLAYERS LIKE BALMUNG, WHO WAS A PICTURE OF BENEVOLENCE TO REGULAR PLAYERS, THE POWER OF THE BRACELET WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A DETESTABLE CHEAT.

HOWEVER, KITE’S CHARACTER WAS STRONGLY PROTECTED AND EVEN SYSTEM ADMINISTRATORS COULD NOT DELETE THE ACCOUNT. WITH HACKER HELBA AS A MEDIATOR, KITE AGREED TO CONTINUE UNDER LIOS’ SUPERVISION.

AIDA SERVER

HELBA HAD AN INTEREST IN KITE'S POWER. HELBA EXPLAINED THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ORCA'S COMA AND *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*. *THE WORLD* WAS BASED ON *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*, AN EPIC ONLINE POEM. THE AUTHOR OF THIS POEM, EMMA WIELANT, DIED AND ONLY SCATTERED FRAGMENTS OF HER WORK REMAIN. PLAYERS WERE CONSTANTLY ARGUING OVER THE AUTHENTICITY AND CONTENTS OF *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*.

KITE WENT TO INVESTIGATE INFECTED AREAS. UNDER LIOS' DIRECTION. HE THEN DESTROYED INNIS IN ITS SECOND PHASE. SKEITH. INNIS—THESE WERE THE ELEMENTS OF MORGANNA THAT WE RESEARCHED IN PROJECT G.U..

AFTER DEFEATING THE 2ND PHASE, INNIS, KITE RETRIEVED ONE OF AURA'S SPLIT SEGMENTS. HE THEN VISITED AN AREA AT AURA'S E-MAILED REQUEST, AND HE ENCOUNTERED CUBIA. KITE WAS ABLE TO HOLD OFF CUBIA BY USING THE POWER OF THE BRACELET. HE RECONFIRMED HIS INTENTIONS TO CONTINUE FREEING SEGMENTS OF AURA, THINKING THAT THIS WOULD UNLOCK THE MYSTERIES.

IT WAS TRULY OUTSTANDING. THIS BOY, KITE, WAS TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING EVEN GREATER THAN WHAT PROJECT G.U. HAD SPENT COUNTLESS MANPOWER, TIME, AND RESOURCES TRYING TO ACHIEVE. HE WAS DOING IT WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT AND WITHOUT HELP. HIS ONLY WEAPONS WERE HIS COURAGE AND HEART.

IN TRYING TO UNCOVER THE MYSTERIES OF *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*, KITE CONTACTED WISEMAN. WISEMAN WAS A WEALTH OF INFORMATION. WITH WISEMAN'S HELP, KITE LEARNED ABOUT

•hack // G.U.

THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT AND THE EIGHT CURSED WAVES. KITE THEN WENT TO VISIT A UNSTABLE SERVER CALLED NET SLUM. IT WAS A PLACE THAT WAS PART OF *THE WORLD* AND YET NOT PART OF *THE WORLD*. THERE, HACKERS, UNSTABLE AI CHARACTERS CALLED ROGUE AIS, AND JUNK DATA MIXED AND GATHERED.

GEEKS' UTOPIA WAS THE HACKERS' PLAYGROUND. KITE REUNITED WITH HELBA THERE. HELBA CREATED THE NET SLUM. THERE, KITE LEARNED THE OBJECTIVE OF HARALD HOERWICK, THE CREATOR OF *THE WORLD*. IN THE VERY DEPTHS OF THE WORLD, HARALD HAD LEFT ANOTHER "WILL" OF SORTS...

HOWEVER, KITE WAS INTERRUPTED BY BALMUNG AND LIOS BEFORE HE COULD DISCOVER MORE. ODDLY, LIOS WAS THE NAME GIVEN TO THE KING OF LIGHT IN *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*, AND HELBA WAS THE NAME OF THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS. IT IS LIKELY THAT THESE TWO, WHO KNEW A BIT OF THE LIGHT IN *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*, CALLED THEMSELVES THAT ON PURPOSE. LIOS WANTED TO REMOVE THE ILLEGAL NET SLUM AND ARGUED WITH HELBA ABOUT IT. DURING THEIR ARGUMENT, THE 3RD PHASE, MAGUS, APPEARED SUDDENLY. KITE BARELY MANAGED TO DEFEAT MAGUS WITH THE POWER OF THE BRACELET. AND THEN, THE TOWNS OF COLLAPSED DATA WERE WAITING FOR HIM.



Ryo began to sympathize with Kite's player. Kite had Orca. Haseo had Shino. They were both playing this game to bring someone back.

They both stood to lose something irreplaceable. They weren't sure of anything, but they kept fighting nonetheless. The battle itself had changed them. Kite had a bracelet, and Haseo had his Avatar. Both were illegal powers. They weren't the same, but they had the same ability. Data Drain was the only hope.

But in Kite's story, Skeith had taken the role of Tri-Edge. In Haseo's story, Skeith had been Kite's enemy.

The first was Skeith, the second was Innis, and the third was Magus. The Morganna Factor that exists in Epitaph-PCs like myself... was the enemy in Kite's world...?

Avatars could be angels or demons, it seemed.

Ryo recalled Kuhn's warning. Depending on the time and place, Skeith could be the bringer of death.

That is the power of Epitaph Users?!

Jun Banshouya was researching Macha in Project G.U.. The cause of the Second Network Crisis was a Morganna Factor, the same as the one that resided in Haseo now. These were the programs that were known as the eight Epitaphs.

Ryo was struck with the enormity of the power he now wielded.

Their stories. Stories that couldn't have been told anywhere but within *The World*. Harald Hoerwick and Emma Wielant...

Ryo had heard those names before. He only knew the rumors that circulated amongst the players of *The World*, though: Harald Hoerwick was the original creator of *The World*, and Emma Wielant was the creator of an incomplete poem called *The Epitaph of Twilight*.

Twilight...

That word rung a bell.

There was a rare item called "The Key of the Twilight." Ovan had been searching for it in the Twilight Brigade.

What did Harald Hoerwick, who built *The World*, want to achieve?

And apparently, lurking in *The World*, was a will separate to Harald Hoerwick's...

Ryo couldn't take his eyes away; he had to keep reading. His desire for knowledge and his curiosity kept his eyes locked on this invaluable document.

CARPENTER FILE: THIRD INTERIM REPORT— OUTBREAK -EROSION AND POLLUTION-

HARALD HOERWICK WAS A SCIENTIST OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. ONE CAN ONLY SPECULATE AT HIS INTENTIONS IN CREATING *THE WORLD*. BUT TO OFFER A ONE-WORD ANSWER, PERHAPS IT WAS "LOVE." AN UNREQUITED LOVE FOR EMMA WIELANT, WHO LEFT THIS WORLD PREMATURELY. SHE LEFT BEHIND THE EPIC ONLINE POEM CALLED *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT...* HARALD BASED THE IDEA FOR THIS INTERNET GAME ON EMMA'S POSTHUMOUS MANUSCRIPT AND SOLD IT TO CC CORPORATION. *THE WORLD* FUSED HARALD'S ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE KNOWLEDGE WITH EMMA WIELANT'S STORY. IN OTHER WORDS...

THE THEORY IS THAT HARALD'S OBJECTIVE WAS TO SAMPLE THE THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS OF MILLIONS OF PLAYERS THROUGH AN INTERNET GAME. THEN, HE WOULD CREATE THE ULTIMATE AI.

AIDA SERVER

WITHIN THE GAME IS THE BLACK BOX: A TOP-SECRET INACCESSIBLE FOLDER DUBBED "THE HARALD SYSTEM." THIS SUGGESTS THAT *THE WORLD* WAS IN FACT CREATED BY HARALD AS A SAMPLING SYSTEM FOR HUMAN THOUGHTS, ONLY IN THE FORM OF AN INTERNET GAME. THIS WAS VERY CLEVERLY CONCEALED WITHIN THE GAME. AND, THE WOMB THAT GAVE BIRTH TO THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA, WAS THE ORIGINAL CORE SYSTEM OF *THE WORLD*: THE MORGANNA SYSTEM.

PERHAPS HARALD SAW AURA AS THE CHILD THAT COULD HAVE BEEN HIS AND EMMA WIELANT'S.

THE RAMPAGE OF THE MORGANNA SYSTEM CAUSED THE SECOND NETWORK CRISIS. THE SERIES OF INCIDENTS OCCURRED BECAUSE MORGANNA, WHOSE PURPOSE WAS TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA, REALIZED THAT ITS OWN EXISTENCE WOULD BECOME REDUNDANT IF THIS HAPPENED, AND SO IT TRIED TO INTERRUPT THE BIRTH OF AURA TO PROTECT ITSELF. MORGANNA WENT AGAINST THE WISHES OF HER CREATOR, HARALD, AND ISOLATED AURA IN THE NETWORK.

SHE MADE THE EIGHT CURSED WAVES PART OF HERSELF, AND THEY BECAME THE EIGHT PHASES OF MORGANNA. THESE PHASES FOUGHT KITE. KITE'S HIS BRACELET HAD BEEN A GIFT FROM THE PREMATURE AURA.

THEN, *THE WORLD* SLOWLY BEGAN TO COLLAPSE.

AFTER DESTROYING PHASE 3, MAGUS, IN THE NET SLUM, KITE RETURNED TO THE ROOT TOWN, BUT HE THEN FACED A DECAYED VERSION OF *THE WORLD*. THE SERVER TROUBLES HAD GOTTEN WORSE AND WORSE, AND THE VIRUS WAS STARTING TO SPREAD

THROUGHOUT THE GAME DATA. *THE WORLD* WAS SUFFERING HUGE FUNCTION FAILURES. THESE INCIDENTS STARTED TO SPREAD INTO THE REAL WORLD.

KITE REALIZED THAT THE MORE HE USED THE BRACELET, THE WORSE *THE WORLD'S* SITUATION BECAME. HOWEVER, WHEN THE GIRL BLACKROSE ADMITTED TO HIM THAT HER BROTHER WAS STILL IN A COMA, KITE TOOK ENCOURAGEMENT. HE WAS RECONCILED WITH BALMUNG AND RESOLVED TO KEEP GOING.

WISEMAN, WHO HAD RESEARCHED THE CURSED WAVES WRITTEN OF IN *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT*, TOLD KITE THAT IN ORDER TO KEEP THE VIRUS INFECTION FROM SPREADING, IT WAS NECESSARY TO DESTROY THE REMAINING FIVE BODIES OF THE EIGHT PHASES, AS WELL AS CUBIA.

WISEMAN'S OPINION WAS OF GREAT INTEREST TO PROJECT G.U.. THAT IS, THEY WERE INTERESTED IN THE IDEA OF LINKS BETWEEN THE BRACELET, CUBIA, AURA, AND THE EIGHT PHASES OF MORGANNA. WE COULD NOT REACH A CONCLUSION BECAUSE THE HINTS IN *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT* WERE SO OBSCURE. WISEMAN'S PROGRESS WAS FAR AHEAD OF THAT OF G.U.'S.

WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE WISEMAN AND HELBA, KITE DEFEATED THE 4TH PHASE, FIDCHELL. IN DOING SO, HE OBTAINED THE SECOND SEGMENT OF AURA. MEANWHILE LIOS WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY WORRIED ABOUT THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS AND THE DECAY OF *THE WORLD* SERVERS.

GUIDED BY HER VOICE, KITE REUNITED WITH AURA IN THE BOTTOM OF THE DUNGEON. BUT, BEFORE THAT, CUBIA APPEARED

AIDA SERVER

FOR THE THIRD TIME. AS IF GUIDED BY THE BRACELET, CUBIA WAS GROWING LARGER.

WHAT A BURDEN THIS MUST HAVE BEEN ON KITE, WHO WAS CARRYING THE FATE OF THE WORLD ON HIS SHOULDERS. PERHAPS HE FELT THE SAME AS I DID. SOME MAY SAY I WAS ALSO SOMETHING OF A HERO, BECAUSE I, LIKE KITE, WAS GUIDING THINGS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, FROM MY POSITION AT THE G.U. PROJECT...

KITE HAD MANAGED TO FIGHT OFF CUBIA AND SUCCEEDED IN MAKING PEACE WITH HACKER HELBA AND THE SYSTEM ADMINISTRATOR LIOS. I COULDN'T HIDE MY SURPRISE WHEN WE JOINED FORCES WITH OUR NATURAL ENEMIES, THE HACKERS.

IT WAS JUST AS HAD BEEN WRITTEN IN *THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT* WHEN THE KING OF LIGHT AND THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS WERE ALLIES IN THE WAR.

DURING THE MORGANNA INCIDENT, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN PROJECT G.U. WAS CONFIRMED: ONE OF THE SIX COMA VICTIMS, SORA, WAS FREED. THE PLAYER SORA'S SOUL WAS ATTACHED TO ONE OF THE EIGHT PHASES IN SKEITH'S STAFF, AND SO IT WAS HELD CAPTIVE IN THE NETWORK. WE AT G.U. WERE FRANTICALLY STUDYING THE AFFINITY BETWEEN THIS HUMAN'S SOUL AND THE EIGHT PHASES. SORA WAS A UNIQUE AND VALUABLE SAMPLE CASE.

GOVERNMENT PRESSURE... CC CORPORATION'S CONSPIRACIES...

TO LIMIT THE VICTIMS AND PREVENT THE DECAY REACHING THE REAL WORLD, KITE AND HIS FRIENDS STARTED OPERATION

TETRAPOD. THEIR AIM WAS TO HALT THE PROGRESS OF THE CURSED WAVE, OR THE EIGHT PHASES OF MORGANNA.

WHEN KITE DESTROYED THE 5TH PHASE, GORRE, HE RECEIVED A TRANSMISSION FROM HELBA. THEY DISCOVERED THE TRUE BODY OF THE CURSED WAVE. IN OTHER WORDS, THEY HAD FOUND THE SELF-AWARE MORGANNA.

GUILTY UNIVERSE: A WORLD OF GRAVE CRIMES, A WORLD OF HARALD HOERWICK'S CRUSHED LOVE AND DREAMS.



When Ryo had finished reading the third file, he knew he had touched the core of *The World*.

Harald Hoerwick. He was trying to create the ultimate AI. Ryo could only speculate as to what sort of moral basis Harald justified creating the ultimate AI in this way. If this Morganna System was sampling human thoughts like Jun Banshouya recorded, it would have to conform to human thought... Ryo thought that Harald must have wanted a girl. As must have his beloved Emma Wielant. Harald made plans to have his Morganna System be part of an MMORPG, and to have Emma's poem, *The Epitaph of Twilight*, be woven into it. He then sold it to CC Corps. It must have been a dark age in the history of the network. When the first version of *The World* opened at the end of 2007, there were over 20,000,000 users. That should have been more than enough samples.

AIDA SERVER

Harald was gathering thoughts from all the players who touched Emma's poem...

The Epitaph is a black box that links our PCs with our minds...

"Black box" was a crude way of describing the Morganna System. The Morganna Factor that resided in Epitaph-PCs was part of the Morganna System that was going to give birth to this ultimate AI, Aura. If Morganna was a human mind sampling system, then it wasn't all that fantastical that the Epitaphs were programs that connected minds to PCs.

Morganna Factors were the actualization of the players' minds in the network.

It was the shape of thought in The World.

But something that Harald hadn't expected happened...

The Morganna System became aware of itself before the ultimate AI did. Morganna thought that once Aura, who the system had been created for, was born, then Morganna would have served its useful purpose. Morganna first tried to prolong the birth and then tried to delete Aura.

Murder the child...?

It was like the stories of child murder in Greek legend. The Lost Ones of seven years ago fell under as a result of the chaos that ensued when the mother tried to kill her child. Kite was the enemy, and Morganna's power took the form of eight monsters, some of which were called Skeith, Innis and Magus.

But in doing this, Morganna was renouncing her very role as a mother...

And so The World became defective.

The virus and mutations caused by the server troubles had a ripple affect into the real world. The video of the massive explosion and resulting fire that happened in Yokohama were still repeated over and over again on television, even today. It was a defining moment in human social memory.

Ryo saw similarities in his situation and that of Project G.U.'s Jun Banshouya and Kite with the Data Drain bracelet: the same illegal power that Haseo had used.

He had also found out of two PCs that were closely linked to Project G.U.: Sieg and Sora. Ryo was particularly interested in Sora, who had been attached to Skeith.

Affinity: It had mass appeal... *The World* was basically a narcotic drug designed to fascinate the human mind.

And then there was this Cubia...



CARPENTER FILE: FOURTH INTERIM REPORT— INEVITABLE SIEGE -QUARANTINE-

MORGANNA, THE CORE SYSTEM OF *THE WORLD*, GAINED A QUASI-PERSONALITY AND, AGAINST THE INTENTIONS OF ITS CREATOR, HARALD, DISCARDED ITS ROLE AS THE BIRTH MOTHER OF THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA. IT CONFINED HARALD'S SPIRIT IN THE NETWORK AND, IN ORDER TO PRESERVE ITS OWN EXISTENCE, TRIED TO DELETE AURA ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER SHE WAS BORN. KITE AND HIS

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COMPANIONS LEARNED THIS AND HEADED INTO THEIR FINAL BATTLE TO REVIVE AURA.

ONE OF KITE'S FRIENDS, THE 'CAT CHARACTER, MIA, WAS ACTUALLY A ROGUE AI AND THE 6TH PHASE, MACHA. WHY ONLY THE 6TH PHASE IMPERSONATED AND TOOK THE FORM OF A NON-PLAYER CHARACTER IS UNKNOWN, BUT THIS WAS AN IMPORTANT SAMPLE CASE FOR PROJECT G.U.. THE "MORGANNA ELEMENTS" WERE ATTACHED TO CHARACTERS AND THE EIGHT PHASES WERE PLACED UNDER A PLAYER'S CONTROL.

WHEN KITE DEFEATED THE 6TH PHASE, MACHA, MIA ALSO DISAPPEARED. THE WIZARD ELK MOURNED THE LOSS OF HIS IRREPLACEABLE FRIEND. BUT, THEY HAD REACHED A POINT OF NO RETURN IN THEIR BATTLE. KITE RECOVERED ANOTHER SEGMENT, AND WITH AURA'S HELP, HE DESTROYED THE 7TH PHASE, TARVOS.

AROUND THAT TIME, THE BOARD OF CC CORPORATION SCHEMED TO DESTROY THE SERVERS IN ORDER TO COVER UP THE COMAS. PERHAPS THE BIGGEST ENEMIES TO KITE AND HIS FRIENDS WERE IN FACT THE COMMERCIALISTIC AND SELF-PROTECTIVE NATURE OF THEIR FELLOW HUMANS. IF *THE WORLD'S* ACTUAL SERVERS WERE DESTROYED, THEY WOULD LOSE ALL MEANS TO HELP THE COMA VICTIMS RECOVER. THE ONLY TWO REMAINING ENEMIES WERE CUBIA AND THE FINAL 8TH PHASE, CORBENIK. HOW IN THE WORLD WOULD THEY FIGHT BOTH? IN THE MIDST OF TIME RUNNING OUT, KITE SCRAMBLED TO FIND A SOLUTION. FINALLY, HE FOUND THE REMAINDER OF HARALD'S CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NOW-LIBERATED AURA IN THE BACK OF A DUNGEON OF AN ERODED AREA.

.hack // G.U.

KITE HAD LEARNED THE TRUTH OF *THE WORLD*. AURA WAS THE DREAM CHILD OF HARALD AND EMMA WIELANT. THE BRACELET AND CUBIA WERE OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE SAME COIN. CUBIA WAS THE ANTI-EXISTENCE OF THE BRACELET. IN ORDER TO DEFEAT CUBIA, THE BRACELET WOULD HAVE TO BE ABANDONED. HOWEVER, IF THE BRACELET WAS ABANDONED, ALL COUNTERMEASURES AGAINST MORGANNA WOULD BE LOST.

FACING THE FINAL BATTLE WITH CUBIA, KITE ASKED FOR BLACKROSE'S HELP. SHE HAD CONTINUED TO SUPPORT HIM AND CHOSE TO DESTROY THE BRACELET SO THAT CUBIA WOULD ALSO BE DESTROYED. KITE WAS CONVINCED THAT AURA HAD THE POWER TO DESTROY THE CURSED WAVES, MORGANNA. THE WORD "TWILIGHT" MEANT DUSK, BUT IT ALSO REFERRED TO DAWN. IF THIS POEM MEANT NOT DUSK, BUT DAWN, THEN AURA WOULD HAVE TO BRING LIGHT TO *THE WORLD*.

KITE AND HIS FRIEND VENTURED INTO BATTLE WITH THE 8TH PHASE, CORBENIK. AS IF IN ANSWER TO AURA'S REVIVAL, KAZU, SIEG, AND ORCA ALSO APPEARED. KITE SET OUT TO DEFEAT CORBENIK TOGETHER WITH ITS ORIGIN, MORGANNA, BUT ALL OF HIS COMPANIONS WERE DEFEATED BY CORBENIK'S ATTACK.

AND...

IN THE DESPERATE BATTLE, THERE WAS AN UNEXPECTED CONCLUSION. AURA THREW HERSELF IN FRONT OF KITE'S BLADE. SELF-SACRIFICE WAS THE FINAL, NECESSARY PROCESS IN ORDER FOR AURA TO AWAKEN AS THE ULTIMATE AI. A TERRIBLE IRONY. PERHAPS, BY ERASING HER "INDIVIDUAL SELF," SHE WAS ABLE TO

AIDA SERVER

BECOME A NEW SYSTEM FOR *THE WORLD*, AS AN ULTIMATE ARTIFICIAL FUNCTION THAT SURPASSED HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.

BUT WILL WE AT PROJECT G.U. EVER REACH THIS HIGH LEVEL?

GENESIS OF ULTIMA: THIS IS A SUMMARY OF THE BATTLE OF HEROES WHO WOULD LATER BE DUBBED “.HACKERS” IN INTERNET RUMORS. THIS IS THE STORY OF KITE AND FRIENDS, AND THE BIRTH OF THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA.

WHO WERE .HACKERS AND WHO WERE NOT .HACKERS.? TO DEFINE SUCH A THING IS POINTLESS. PERHAPS A WISER MAN THAN ME, READING THIS MEMOIR, WILL UNDERSTAND. THEY DID NOT CHOOSE TO BE CALLED HEROES AND NEVER WANTED CREDIT FOR SAVING THE WORLD. THEY DID IT ONLY TO SAVE THOSE THEY LOVED—TO PROTECT THEM. THEY FOUGHT WITH FAITH IN THEIR HEART. IT IS A HUMAN’S DREAM TO BE A HERO. WE CAN ONLY CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THAT.

FROM THAT TIME, PROJECT G.U. HAD ALREADY BEGUN—



This was where Jun Banshouya notes ended.

The Second Network Crisis, The Morganna incident.

There was no way that Ryo could understand all of these files. As if Jun Banshouya had awakened, he’d started to write his report in the first person. This wasn’t a high school literature class; the writer had been encompassed and swallowed by the crisis. Ryo understood how the writer felt.

Ryo took courage from Kite's story.

Seven years ago, Kite found a way to save the Lost Ones!

Haseo could save Shino, just as Kite had saved Orca. If the only thing this report had accomplished was to give Ryo hope, then it was worth reading.

I have to understand The World!

Ryo recalled Ovan's words: "This game has a mysterious autonomy."

Autonomy.

There were parts of the game that played by its own rules, uncontrolled by CC Corp. The Key of the Twilight that Ovan and his Twilight Brigade were searching for was not created by CC Corp. It was an item born from *The World* itself.

If it existed at all.

Aura...

Ovan knew about the ultimate AI, Aura?

Ryo came to a realization. Searching for this Key of the Twilight was a metaphor; Ovan really wanted to search out the autonomy within *The World*.

What for?

He had to get Ovan to tell him. He needed to know the answer, because Shino had fallen unconscious while on that adventure...



It was the time of the Twilight Brigade.

Ryo was just a beginner at MMOs, and a Harvest Cleric called Shino was helping him. Although he had spent hours in the company of a girl, he didn't see Shino as a member of the opposite sex. There was no sexual tension.

They were in the grasslands area. The sea was in the distance. This high up, the giant ruins fluttered like a mirage. When Ryo asked what that was, Shino told him that it was the Crest Gun.

In the war between the gods and humans several millennia ago, humanity was being defeated. At that time, Fort Ouph, the floating city, was shot from the sky.

Carmina Gadelica, the city of culture, had been destroyed by a bolt of lightening. The people used a giant cannon to fire a shot of light into the heavens, where the gods lived, using the power of the goddess Aurora, which was sealed in Hulle Granz cathedral. The heavens were engulfed in flames, and the gods either fled or fell to the ground in a ball of fire. However, the Crested Cannon could not hold all the energy of Aurora, and so the Relic City of Lia Fail was destroyed.

While Ryo listened to this story unfold, he enjoyed the simple comfort of hearing Shino's voice. Sometimes, he stole glances of her profile.

"I'm sure you've already heard the storied about the Isle of Kings, Hy Brasail, that was built to celebrate the victory over the gods? And about the tree that seals the God of Death?" she asked.

Having finished hunting some mobs, they now sat in the shade of a tree, a private chat opened between them. He had asked Shino's real age. She was three years older than him.

"Haseo, why *The World*?" Shino asked.

"I don't know."

"Oh."

"Do you have a reason?"

"No..."

No reason was needed to play *The World*. But Shino had told Haseo that if you visited this world then you had to look after those around you.

"But what happens here doesn't matter, right?"

"It does."

"But Shino, this is the 'net.'"

He wanted no limitations. No one plays an online game to get bogged down with more relationship complications. As soon as he made that argument, Ryo regretted it. Here she was, just trying to be kind, and his words sounded like a rebuttal.

Shino plucked a flower. "I just want to share my happiness."

He said nothing.

"But everyone has their limits. They can't do everything alone. And when times of trouble come, all the people that person rejected and all the people that person hurt—none of them will come to help."

Shino offered the flower to Haseo as a gift item. He took it, and regardless of Shino's intentions in offering the flower, Haseo

was at a loss for words. It was as if Shino had seen straight through Haseo and knew Ryo's heart.

"Don't look away."

"You should always look the other person eyes," she told him. That was the most impressive Ryo had ever seen Shino. The image of her then was burned into his memory. When Ryo thought of her later, he always recalled her in that moment.



The sign of Tri-Edge appeared on Shino's face as Ryo's memory turned darker. *What did it mean to look people in the eye in an online game?* Ryo didn't understand then. The words, the flowers—it was no different from how Atoli had acted in previous days. But Ryo would have been annoyed if it had been Atoli. Shino was the one who made his heart start to race. A computer graphic doesn't change, but he had seen something new in her. His reaction to Atoli's graphics and Shino's graphics were different.

It wasn't just what she said...

It was who was saying it. That was what made him react differently.

Shino was always so sure that there was a goddess.

Atoli would never look down on him.

He had friends. Ryo felt that he was starting to understand what Shino was telling him. It wasn't something that could be seen. It was in reaction to words in a message window.

Perhaps she was telling him to look at people's feelings.

Sometimes words can begin a turning point in a person's life.

Ryo Misaki had been seeking power, but after reading the Banshouya File, his opinions on everything had been shaken. After studying the Morganna incident in which Kite had fought in seven years ago, Ryo couldn't just rely on power to rescue the Lost Ones.

Understanding... Understanding of The World's creation and what it has become.

Just like Kite's friends. They were part of rescuing the Lost Ones.

How should he use this power and ambition in his hand?

He read the Banshouya Files over and over.

Now there was one burning question left: *Why does Tri-Edge, or Azure Kite, take the form of a seven year old hero called Kite?*

Ryo felt that this was the secret to unraveling the mystery of the eight phases of Morganna that appeared seven years ago as human enemies.

Phase 1—Skeith —The Terror of Death

Phase 2—Innis—The Mirage of Deceit

Phase 3—Magus—The Propagation

Phase 4—Fidchell—The Prophet

Phase 5—Gorre—The Machinator

Phase 6—Macha—The Temptress

Phase 7—Tavros—The Avenger

Phase 8—Corbenik—The Rebirth

One of these was a part of Epitaph-PCs: Phase I was Haseo's, Phase 3 was Kuhn's, Phase 7 was Pi's, and Phase 2 was Atoli, who was now a Lost One.

The 6th Phase, Macha... Macha was the Cat PC called Mia...?

And then there was the Emperor of the Demon Palace arena, Endrance. It had to be the same player as the one who operated the Wavemaster called Elk, whom Ryo read about in the Banshouya Files.

Mia was an NPC, an AI character.

The Wavemaster, Elk, and the Cat PC, Mia, were close friends.

When Haseo had fought Endrance in the arena, in Avatar Space, he had seen the memories of the Endrance's player. In Elk's eyes, it wasn't Kite who had destroyed Mia, but the unseen hand of a god. It left a mystery behind. But that memory probably wasn't formed seven years ago.

However, Endrance was Wavemaster Elk. Ryo had to borrow his power. He was part of the Morganna incident.

Ryo recalled Ovan's words: "You are a prisoner of your own responsibilities."

He couldn't forget somebody who knew him. He had been suffering for Shino for half a year now.

It's not just for Shino and Atoli... I have to save Endrance. That's the path to rescuing the Lost Ones.

"Where there's a will, there's a way."

The path will be created by my will.

Endrance is hurting. He is suffering from what happened in a previous world, where an NPC called Mia existed.

The “enemies” of that story, who attacked Atoli and Endrance... Maybe they are related to AIDA? This could be an advantage...?

Ryo suddenly realized: If the AIDA are after the Morganna factors, he could use himself as bait! After all, he was an Epitaph User. He would defeat these AIDA.

Solving this is my responsibility. I won't look away again.

Motivated by what the brave Kite did seven years ago, Ryo renewed his vow. Ignoring Yata's warning, he left Raven's @HOME.



SIX

Canard @HOME

Haseo received a personal message from Sakubo.

Through the door that granted access to all guild's @HOME, Ryo entered Canard's @HOME. Canard was Sakubo's guild. It specialized in helping new players. It used to be that to enter, a player needed to be issued the @HOME key. It was proof of permission to enter, but now that Haseo was a system PC, he had a

special debug command added to his main menu, so he was free to enter any @HOME he wanted. He could also transport to any area he wanted without the need for a chaos key. These were the official limits of *The World*.

“Ah! Haseo?” Sakubo didn’t seem to recognize Haseo at first.

“Ah, you mean this?”

This was the first time that Bo had seen Haseo in his third form.

“It’s been a busy time. Don’t worry about it,” Haseo replied.

Sakubo had been close to being PKed at the harbor by Negimaru and it looked like he’d been hiding in the @HOME since. It was now possible to be PKed in the Root Town and the PCs who were PKed weren’t rezzing. It was dangerous to leave. Fortunately, it didn’t look like the members of Kestrel had tried to find a way into this @HOME. They were too busy running amok in the streets and causing panic.

“Bo... Do you know anything about Endrance?” Haseo asked.

“Well Saku likes Endrance.”

“I know. Anything is fine. Especially any information from when I was fighting Endrance in the arena. I wonder if Saku may have said anything...”

Saku was the one who chased after Master En, as she liked to call him. Ryo had the feeling that he was clutching at straws, but he still had to ask.

“I got mail,” Bo said with some reluctance.

“Mail?”

“It was a reply to a love letter Saku had sent Endrance. I opened it by mistake... Please don't tell Saku!”

Bo shared a PC with his sister Saku, so he must have read a message that was intended for her and not him.

“When was this? Before the title match?”

“No... It was straight after you fought him. From the subject line, it looks like Saku was trying to comfort him,” Bo replied.

Saku had sent a mail to Endrance after Haseo had defeated him, and she had received a reply. But Endrance was believed to be unconscious after the title match...

“What did it say?”

“Umm... She asked about his cat.”

“Cat?!”

Why would Saku ask about Mia? Ryo tried to get more details.

“I'm sorry. I don't remember. I knew Saku would get mad, so I closed it straight away,” Bo answered.

“Okay. That's all right. Thanks.”

The player that the Serpent of Lore had shown him lying unconscious in a hospital bed was definitely Endrance. What happened to the PCs of players who became Lost Ones? Shino's PC had been recovered by Yata. However, he hadn't heard that the G.U. Project had recovered Endrance's PC.

“Ah... Bo, wait!” Ryo thought of something. “You can't log-out and you can't see your desktop display... but I wonder if you can access your area history?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah. If I went to a chaos gate...” Bo nodded.

Haseo formed a party with Bo and then they transported to the Mac Anu chaos gate.

There were a lot of PCs standing around in the chaos gate dome. They all looked exhausted. They didn't seem to have the energy to cry anymore. They'd been so drained from trying to navigate the bedlam of the streets. They were like survivors of a plague.

From the chaos gate command, Ryo could see all the areas where Sakubo had been recently.

“Bo... There must be some areas here that you don't remember visiting, right? Are there any areas that make you feel uneasy?” Haseo asked.

“Uneasy?”

If Saku and Endrance had been talking, then there was a good chance that they may have met up.

Bo started checking through his area history.

“Well?”

“I don't know...”

“Please... It doesn't matter how small it is. There must be something.”

“Umm... you know...” Bo didn't seem sure of himself as he spoke. “There is an area that Saku goes to. She's been going there a lot recently...”

“Really?! Where?!”

“Δ Hidden Forbidden Dead Wood. Do you remember? We both went there once with Atoli.”

“A lost ground?!”

Dead World of Indieglut Lugh. It was an area with a lake. From the middle of the lake grew a crystal tree. They had been transported there after Atoli had discovered Tri-Edge’s sign, and it was there that they had first seen Endrance.

“I haven’t been to that lake since... Kuhn said it was a bugged area and that we shouldn’t go near it.”

“I see. Thanks, Bo.”

Ryo had found the information he needed.

Haseo took Bo back to the safety of his guild’s @HOME. He then disbanded the party and transported himself using the debug command.



Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN DEAD WOOD. DEAD WORLD OF INDIEGLUT LUGH

Over the quiet lake of Indieglut Lugh, the crystal tree’s branches stretched.

Haseo was standing on the shore and Ryo made the PC walk forward into the scenery.

Normal PCs couldn’t enter water. But that was yesterday. Now that Haseo was a system PC, he had system permissions. He could pass through the invisible wall and step out into the middle of the lake.

Haseo looked at his surroundings.

There was no BGM here. All he could hear was the sound of water.

The crystal branches above his head twinkled. Looking closer, Haseo could see that inside the branches, clean water flowed like blood. This tree was alive.

There was no one else in this grove but Haseo.

Just as Ryo was feeling a little disappointed, he noticed something. “Huh?!”

Ryo held his breath.

The lake reflected the sparkling crystal tree. In this natural mirror, Haseo caught a glimpse of feet...

“Endrance!”

The elegant Blade Brandier was on the shore.

His rose decorations, his clothes, and his silver shoulder armor—all of it was gray. He laid on his back with his arms folded. He looked like he’d been encased in wax.

The AIDA that pretended to be a cat was nowhere to be seen. Haseo had deleted the AIDA that had infected Endrance.

“What?”

Haseo couldn’t target Endrance, so he couldn’t open up a personal chat window.

Endrance had used to play in the different environments, but now he was just an object, a part of *The World’s* scenery.

“A visitor to Dead World of Indieglut Lugh,” said a voice that echoed through the grove.

“Cut down the great tree of Hladgud. Fulfill the wishes of the God of Death.”

It wasn't Endrance's voice. The voice sounded wise. It almost sounded like a divine welcome.

Then Ryo realized.

There was a target marker flashing on the crystal tree. Hladgud must be the name of the tree. Ryo remembered what Shino had told him. The tree sealed the God of Death. That was the story about Indieglut Lugh. The Lost Grounds all seemed to have a legend about *The World* attached to it. However...

An event in a Lost Ground?

Nothing should happen in this area.

But events did happen in these mysterious Lost Grounds. At Grande Hulle Cathedral, Azure Kite had appeared. In Indieglut Lugh, Endrance had appeared. At Morrigu Barrow Wall, Atoli had been lost. All of these had been illegal incidents, caused by AIDA.

Ryo was on his guard but also scared.

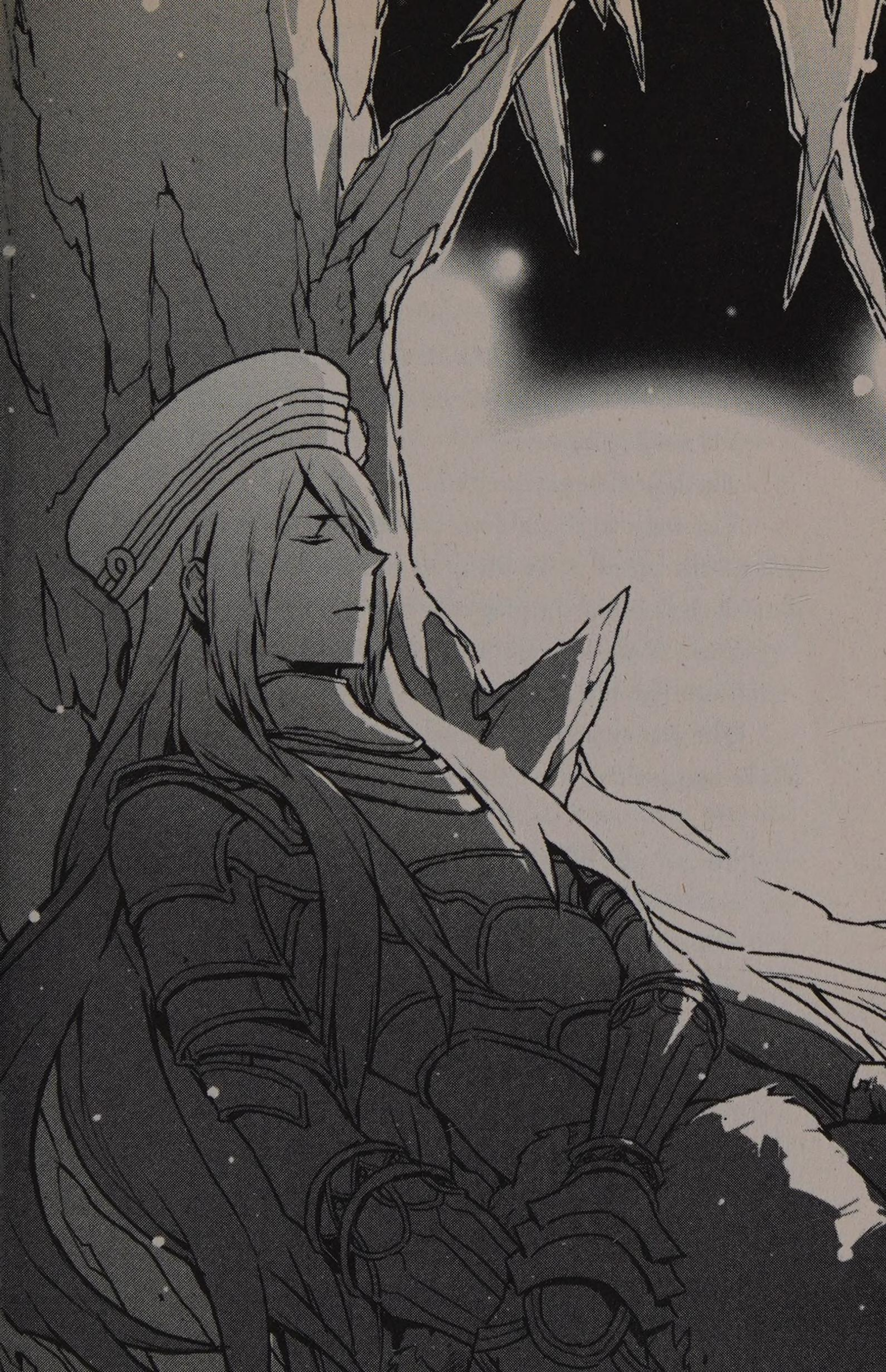
If this is an AIDA server... If this is not the original The World, then nowhere is safe, Ryo thought. If he got caught up with the AIDA, then he wouldn't get back to reality.

Haseo was the one who got to choose whether to abandon Endrance, who was submerged in the lake, or save him.

“Hope? What I am looking for is true death.”

If this was the God of Death...

Targeting Hladgud, Haseo equipped a chainsaw as a weapon.



“Give me back Endrance... Atoli... Shino... and all the Lost Ones!”

The teeth of the chain saw penetrated the bark of the tree's trunk, causing a crack to run up the tree. Then, as if a bolt of lightening had hit Hladgud, it split in two.

The crystal tree shattered from the tips of the branches down to the trunk. The lake was covered in a shower of glass.

Will something happen now?

The Lost Ground rumbled.

The water in the lake started to swirl down the newly made hole of the island where the great tree had once been. It was like someone had pulled the plug on a tub.

Dead World Indieglut Lugh started to crumble.

Then Ryo felt himself falling.

The gravity program pulled him downward. The strange area was being sucked down.

The pure white Hladgud

Sealed the son of the kingdom of the dead.

When the great tree withered, it beckoned the end of this world

The mirror of the lake is the border between this world and that world.

At the end of the world

The god will lead his army of the dead into this world.



⊕ Hidden Forbidden Hades, Wailing Capital Wald Uberlisterin

The god Sol managed the shining city in the heavens. The god's young brother, Cernunnos, oversaw the underground city called Wailing Capital Wald Uberlisterin. Just as Zeus ruled Olympus and his older brother Hades ruled the underworld. This was Hades, the kingdom of the dead. *The World* had a pluralistic view of gods and the afterworld was closer to that of Greek legend than it was to Christianity's.

This was a new Lost Ground.

In front of Haseo was the Wailing Capital Wald Uberlisterin. It looked like the biblical tower of Babel or the castles in tarot cards. The huge fortress protected the city. The steeples stood close together, reaching up into the sky. The buildings were in ruins, and it looked like it had been abandoned for many hundreds of years.

Ryo took in this reversal of the heaven and earth.

The castle was all upside down. The steeples along with the moat water all flooded downward like rain. Among the shadows were flickers of dim light. Little fireflies shone and floated in the air like wondering spirits. Ryo felt a fear that shook the very core of his soul.

Entrance...

The pale Entrance was stuck to the ceiling like a fly.

Haseo ran forward until he was standing under Entrance.

The fireflies reacted to something. Suddenly, one of the towers collapsed.

This world was born from our corpses!

This sky was born from our last breaths!

Everything that lives now! Look at us!

Hear us!

Smell us!

Taste us!

Touch us!

Know the bitterness of our death that fills this world!

The king of the dead led the shrieking. "My name is Cernunnos." It was a one-eyed giant god. It appeared in the area like a monster would.

"Cernunnos?"

The god's body was like a gray hairless caterpillar, covered in spiked bands. Its long arms pulled its body across the ceiling. Its eye fixed its gaze on Haseo, and the giant spoke again: "Pathetic human. You don't even know the name of the god who controls half this world. Well, it is forgiven. Haseo, you are the mortal who shattered the tree Hladgud that sealed me."

Then Haseo realized.

It was he who was backward. The place where he was standing was the ceiling. Cernunnos was crawling on the floor and Endrance was lying on the ground.

Uberlisterin was the underworld, and Haseo's soul hadn't lost connection to his PC, so he was alive still. "Then promise

me you'll return Endrance," Ryo tried his luck with the God of Death.

"Return? You say?"

“If this is the underworld... then... I want you to return that player’s mind to the real world,” Haseo challenged.

He couldn't target the god. This wasn't an ordinary monster.

"I won't. This being... Endrance, he's mine."

"What?"

“Humanity will be terrified of death. Now that the tree Hladgud is gone, the God of Death rules the world. First to fall will be you, Haseo... I will give you death too.”

Cernunnos took a fighting stance and raised his banded arms in the air.

Ryo didn't hear things from the inevitable distance that speakers permit. Instead, the god's roar went straight into his ears.

That wasn't the only thing he felt...

When the attack made contact, Haseo yelped in pain. He swore. It broke his concentration.

“Who do you think you are?!” Haseo’s heart sank.

"Huh?"

"This isn't a game. I don't know what you want but if you want it, you better get serious..."

This wasn't an in-game event. This was an AIDA server and this was an AIDA phenomenon.

"Ngh... DIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"
Cernunnos screamed.

A crushing blow hit Haseo on the head. He felt real pain. This was an AIDA monster and far more powerful than a normal mob. Haseo's level-133 health gauge had been reduced to half. He couldn't defend himself. The auto guard ability that he had equipped to his defense item wasn't working either.

His life was in danger. None of the dead PCs on the AIDA server had rezzed.

Who was behind all this? What was truth and what was fantasy? Where had reality gone? He had to try something so that he wasn't crushed...

He released Avatar Skeith.

His will became purple flashes that burst out.

The Avatar linked his PC and his mind. It was power he could use...

"THE SHADOW OF DEATH!"

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrr!” With Cernunnos’s horrific scream, the kingdom of the dead started to collapse like a balloon.

The bubbles poured out.

AIDA?!

Everything shattered.

All the data was covered in the black bubbles. They dropped to the floor and scattered.

Ugh!

Haseo had nowhere left to stand. He clung to Skeith for dear life. He had to rely totally on his Avatar.

Haseo searched for the gray PC who had been swallowed up by the Lost Ground. Seeing him, Haseo reached out his hand. He wanted to save him.

Endrance!

The moment that they touched, the world reversed.

Suddenly, Haseo was in the bottom of the lake.

From the surface of the water, a Shadow Warlock wearing a crescent hat looked at him. It was Sakubo, kneeling and looking down into the river.

“Heh heh... You want to stay here, I’m sure.”

It was like being in a dream or a surreal Aesop’s fable where everything was wrong.

“Your cat isn’t here... I’m sorry.”

She looked mesmerized.

The Osaka accent was a give-away that this was the sister, Saku. Sakubo was a character used by twins. Saku was the sister, and Bo was the brother.

“But you have to stay here, right?” Her voice echoed.

Who was she speaking to?

“Right, Master En.”



When he came to, Haseo was lying on the lakeside. He was back in Dead World of Indieglut.

The area look as it had been before. The tree which should no longer be standing was still there as if nothing had happened. Its branches reached out across the lake.

It had all been an illusion.

That was... Saku...

Endrance was collapsed still, half-submerged. Haseo grabbed the ashen body firmly with his right hand. "Endrance!" Haseo kept calling his name.

Endrance's gray lips twitched. He was conscious. Slowly, his eyes flickered open. "Oh, it's you." Endrance struggled to get the words out.

He lost interest and looked away. It was because Haseo wasn't Mia.

"Endrance. Umm..."

"Leave me... I've lost everything. She's gone. I may still exist but this is no life. I was sleeping so peacefully. I was broken. I had hoped to never wake again. And when I do wake, it's you. Your sharp claws digging into me. Nothing could be worse..."

Endrance rejected Haseo's concern.

But Haseo did not turn away. He didn't do all this just for himself.

Haseo had been behaving exactly like Endrance until the other day.

Still Atoli and Bo had shown him kindness, despite his behavior. They didn't have to. They didn't owe him anything. Moreover, Haseo had injured Endrance in a way that could never be compensated.

Even if it had been fake and only something that the AIDA had shown him, Endrance had lost his beloved Mia because of Haseo.

"You have no business here. She's not here. I'm not fighting anymore. There's no point in fighting. I fought for her..." Endrance was delirious.

"She... You mean, the cat. The one on your shoulder?"

"Her name is Mia. She has always been my friend. She left once, but she came back."

In the Banshouya Files, Mia was the cat PC that was defeated by Kite's bracelet seven years ago. Haseo wondered how she had been resurrected.

"I only have the network. I only have Mia. The only person who noticed me, who cared for me, was Mia. I did anything I could for Mia. I hung on her every word. I got insecure. I cried. I laughed. I was so very happy. But..."

The cat PC Mia had once again been crushed by an unseen hand of god. During their fight in the arena, Haseo had seen Endrance's memories. They had been after the Morganna incident.

"I understand some of what happened seven years ago," Ryo started. "Endrance... the cat that you call Mia isn't the real Mia. It's AIDA—a monster that feeds on humans created. It was a virus."

"You're wrong. She is Mia. I love her just like before."

"You're not seeing her right! If she is important to you, at least know if she is real or fake!" Ryo's voice went up in pitch.

"Haseo, what gives you the right to preach to me? You don't care about me. Everyone is the same. No one needs me..."

"You can't let it end like this... without doing anything, without knowing anything!" Haseo was starting to sob.

"Knowing?"

"If you don't understand, think! You must have at least had time to think in the bottom of the lake!"

"Haseo, why are you talking to me?"

"I..." Haseo looked away. These were the words he had to say. He looked at Endrance and then finally said it. "I'm sorry."

Haseo was apologizing.

"Wha...?"

"I didn't think of your feelings. I didn't know, but I didn't try to think of you either... about how important Mia was to you."

Like Shino was important to Ryo, Mia was important to Endrance.

In *The World*, it didn't matter if it was PC or NPC, if it was human or cat, the differences were blurred.

"You make me sick." Endrance laughed at Haseo. He didn't welcome this apology. "Fine. I don't care if you don't want to try and understand me. I'm sick in the head. If you got to understand me, maybe you'd go funny in the head too. Mia wasn't a PC, she was an NPC. She was rogue AI. A lost program. I don't know who it was that killed Mia again. But to them, Mia was just another program—data that wasn't following the rules of *The World*."

To some, she was irreplaceable; to others, she didn't matter. Just like a pet is a cherished family member but a nuisance to the neighbors.

"But Mia was everything to me. Even if she could only live in *The World*. She was the whole world for my poor wretched heart."

But, I know about Mia." Haseo didn't give up. "Endrance, I hurt you. I did something that I can't take back. That's why I can't abandon you. No matter how much you curse me and despise me." Haseo looked Endrance straight in the eye as he spoke: "I need you, Endrance."

"Me?"

"My goal wasn't to win. My goal wasn't to defeat you. My goal wasn't to get power. I wanted to save you."

Shino. Atoli. And now, Endrance.

Endrance was entirely taken aback by Haseo's words of remorse. Endrance then took Haseo's hands again. "This feels strange. The touch of a person's hand... How long has it been since I held another's hand?"

"Ngh." Haseo suddenly felt embarrassed and didn't know how to respond.

"Warm... I can feel your pulse. Dadum. Dadum... Even though we're in *The World*. Strange." Endrance looked at his hand in total wonderment.

The touch of another human's hand, warm and alive.

Haseo had felt severe pain, heat, and cold, all the AIDA and Avatar attacks, but Haseo had never felt something so acutely until

this moment. It was so close to touching real skin. This may have been because Endrance was an Epitaph User. Atoli had heightened hearing; perhaps Endrance had a heightened sense of touch.

"Mia and I couldn't hold hands like this."

"Mia..." Haseo pushed his hand to Endrance's chest.

"Huh?"

"Your friend is still here."

Suddenly, from the middle of Endrance's gray chest, a red light shone.

It was the special gem that Haseo had seen in the memories. A gem taken from him by an unseen force.

"Mia... Macha..." Endrance started muttering words. It seemed like all the old memories were flooding back.

"Mia... was the sixth Morganna, called Macha." Ryo remembered this from the Banshouya Files.

Just like Skeith resided inside Haseo, the Fear of Death Epitaph-PC, Macha resided in Endrance, The Temptress Epitaph-PC.

"She's here." Endrance clutched both of his hands to his chest. "You were here, Mia."

Dadum.

The red factor beat like a heart.

Haseo's factor beat in time.

"Warm..."

He was feeling his beloved Mia inside him. Slowly, Endrance's body was bathed in a red glow. Gradually, his hat, his clothes, and his rose regained their vibrant colors.

"Endrance..." Haseo passed through the invisible wall and reached his hand out to Endrance.

"Haseo. You hurt me," Endrance looked coldly at Haseo. "I cannot forgive you for looking into my heart. You saw secrets that were between Mia and I. I never wanted anyone else to know them."

"I..." Haseo decided to reveal his secret in compensation. "I am fighting to save Shino. She fell unconscious while playing *The World*. That is why..."

"I know."

Endrance had also seen into Haseo's heart during that fight in the arena.

"You saw my memories."

When their Avatars had touched, Haseo had felt like they were sharing their memories. In Avatar Space, Haseo had seen the memories of Endrance's player and Endrance had seen Ryo's memories.

"A little."

"Shino and Mia! I just know that the same thing is behind it all. So... so..." Haseo was failing miserably at forming words at this point. All he could do was stretch his hand out that little further.

Endrance stared at this outstretched hand. Finally, without taking the hand, he crossed the invisible wall back into the place he should be. He left the world of the dead and reentered the world where he belonged.

"You weren't the one who saved me. It was Mia," Endrance said, his hand still pushed tight to his chest.

"Yes."

"But, you did help me to see Mia again and know she was with me. You made me realize."

"Huh?"

"You said sorry. So I should say thank you. You opened my eyes. Haseo, the warmth of your emotion melted my heart."

Endrance's breathing started to grow heavy. Immediately he looked for an explanation to the situation he felt himself in.

Anyone would have reacted the same way. Even though he had regained consciousness, this was an AIDA server, and he could no longer sense his real self.

Haseo explained briefly what had happened and how this was now an AIDA server.

"Unconscious? I..."

Fortunately, Endrance was quick to understand. Perhaps being part of the Morganna incident seven years ago had opened his mind and increased his powers of comprehension.

"Your real self is now a Lost One. You're unconscious and in the hospital. It was after the title match..."

Despite being hospitalized and unable to play the game, Endrance was locked into the AIDA server. Endrance's mind was in the game.

"I don't know. I don't remember everything," Endrance said. He looked distressed and puzzled as he stroked his hair. "It can't have been because of what happened in the arena."

“Huh?”

“After I fought you in the arena, I logged out of *The World*.”

That meant that after they had fought, Endrance had still been conscious.

So during the title match, I only deleted the AIDA cat.

“When was the next time you logged in?”

If the reason for Endrance becoming a Lost One wasn't Skeith, then who had sent Endrance to the hospital, unconscious?

“Right after the title match, I got a mail. She said she knew where Mia was. But it was fake I guess. Because Mia was here,” Endrance said dreamily as he spoke of Macha inside him.

“Mail? Saku?!” Ryo suddenly remembered what Bo had told him.

“That's right. That stalker girl. I did what she said in the mail and came to Indieglut Lugh.”

However, he hadn't met Saku. His memories suddenly went blank and he didn't remember anything after his arrival.

Saku?

Haseo remembered the image he had seen earlier of Saku looking down at Endrance, who was submerged in the lake.

“What is going on in this game?” Haseo asked, his heart so full of doubt. He realized that he had to know more about *The World* if he was to save Shino and Atoli.



In the Serpent of Lore, Yata watched over *The World* like an omnipotent god.

Order and disorder. Goodness is crushed, chaos reigns.

This AIDA server is human history in a nutshell.

Faith. The foundations...

"This is about the limit."

He cleared his throat and then turned to the operations panel.



SEVEN

Raven @HOME Serpent of Lore

Yata was holding a meeting at the Serpent of Lore with Kuhn and Pi.

"Hint?" Pi asked Yata.

In the information windows were pictures of the PCs trapped on the AIDA server. They were scared, despairing, crying out, frantic. The PKers of Kestrel hadn't ceased in their killing spree. Root Towns had become a hunting ground, and with no one to clean up the bodies, the ashen corpses of PCs were piling up on the streets.

Yata's saw this situation as an opportunity, a chance to learn more. This was a hint.

“We just need to use some reasoning.”

Pi knew that when Yata spoke like this, he was becoming more confident of something. Yata would deliberate. He would consider many theories, evaluate them, eliminate some, and weigh up the possibilities.

“Can’t log-out as a hint? A hint to the player’s self by the inability to feel their physical bodies...”

“The AIDA have infected people’s minds. We need to interfere with that.”

“But all these people...” Kuhn seemed to agree with Yata’s opinion but was in shock that all the players had been subject to this persuasive hint by the AIDA at the same time.

“Then it was all the logged in players.”

“Just like the hint that was given to the Lost Ones in the Morganna incident seven years ago?”

I was dead. My soul was lost in an online game.

Kuhn was alluding to what had been written in the Banshouya Files.

Seven years ago, the minds of the Lost Ones had been subjected to a persuasive hint by Morganna. It blurred their boundaries between real life and a game.

“Yes. If it’s a hint, then it’s a problem with awareness. The fact that the Serpent of Lore is moving normally supports this theory.”

Yata raised his hand to the Serpent of Lore, which flickered. The surveillance system was operating normally and had not been affected by this “hint.”

"An investigation is necessary," Yata stated firmly. "The Serpent of Lore will collect data here. This is a one-in-a-million opportunity for Project G.U. to get close to the AIDA."

"We can analyze the data and understand the rules of AIDA," Pi agreed with Yata.

"NO WAY!" Kuhn reacted strongly. "We should be prioritizing the safety of the players! We have to find a way to escape this!" Kuhn pointed at the images of Root Town and criticized their plan. "We are system administrators; we should be doing something to ensure the players' safety!"

Yata flatly rejected Kuhn's impassioned pleas. "That is exactly why we will investigate." Yata then looked at the data and explained again why observation and experimentation were so important.

"Every problem and every theory is written on blank paper. We are close. We have to find out more about the AIDA. No one can know something better than those who have experienced it."

No one challenged Yata this time. Kuhn was quiet, but he didn't seem satisfied. Kuhn was just about to lodge another complaint when suddenly he noticed that Yata was looking over his shoulder. Spinning around to discover the distraction...

"Haseo..." Kuhn yelled. "Endrance?!"

Haseo had returned to the @HOME with Endrance, the Epitaph User of the Temptress. He looked at the three G.U. members. "What's going on now?"

"Has Endrance regained consciousness?" Yata asked, interested. His research had led him to believe that Endrance's

player had fallen unconscious and been hospitalized after the title match in the arena.

Endrance glanced at Yata but said nothing.

"As you can see," Haseo answered instead.

"Well... that's good! It doesn't mean he can return to the real world, but still good. He's woken from a dream, but it must still feel like a dream."

Kuhn walked over and patted Haseo on the back. He then gave Endrance a friendly smile. Endrance either decided he didn't like Kuhn, or he had already made a decision to ignore them; either way, he looked over at the Serpent of Lore, disinterested.

"Haseo, did you help Endrance?" Pi asked.

"Endrance woke up himself. He listened to himself."

"This is an AIDA server. A parallel world to *The World*," Yata spoke like a prophet.

"Parallel world?"

"This is a second version of *The World* created by the AIDA. In this world, AIDA are the rulers."

"What should we do?! We need to get Atoli back from the AIDA!" Haseo said excitedly.

"It's simple. To return Atoli and all the ordinary players to the real world, we first need to return to the real CC Corps server..."

"Fortunately, this AIDA server is not a complete parallel world. The Serpent of Lore has recorded one phenomenon of particular interest and you should have felt it too: the lag that this server is experiencing. This is *The World* that the AIDA prepared, but

it does not have the same specs as the true CC Corps servers. That is why the number of PCs is limited.”

Even if some PCs died, new players couldn’t log-in. That was a rule. This was a limited test of the AIDA server.

“So?” Haseo wanted to know how this was going to help them.

“I am looking for a security hole in the AIDA server,” Yata said.

Kuhn stopped him from saying anything else. “We have a message from Moon Tree!”

“Moon tree?” Haseo asked Kuhn.

An information window opened in the Serpent of Lore. It displayed Moon Tree’s @HOME. In the image were hundreds of PCs. The temple had been turned into a refugee camp.

“It’s a request for our cooperation. To protect the players.”

The guild members of Moon Tree had evacuated PCs to their @HOME. The guild key was like a visa, enabling PCs to avoid their own holocaust.

“Kuhn... you...”

Kuhn had been thinking primarily of the players’ safety. Ryo, in contrast, had only looked after those immediately close to him—he only cared for Sakubo or Endrance and Atoli. Previously, he had wanted to be a hero and emulated Kuhn, but now the words he spoke were true.

“That isn’t a problem, right? Yata?”

“I don’t mind. And the message from Moon Tree?” Yata permitted Kuhn to follow this up.

"It's from the Guild Master Zelkova." Kuhn relayed the contents of his personal chat with Zelkova. "It seems that they encountered something strange while they were helping the players."

"Strange?"

"An area called Δ Hidden Forbidden Bulwark," Kuhn spoke. The Serpent of Lore displayed a live feed from the Lost Ground Morrigu Barrow Wall. Deeply carved in every flat area of wall...

"Tri-Edge!" Haseo muttered.

"This AIDA server was prompted when Atoli was transported to the coin locker area from Tri-Edge's sign in Morrigu Barrow Wall."

"But this is an AIDA server. Nothing is the same," Pi said as she gazed at the sign in the feed.

"It's worth investigating," Haseo said with confidence.

Any small clue was worth following now. That was how he had been able to save Endrance in Indieglut Lugh.

"You're right! Let's go, Haseo." Kuhn agreed wholeheartedly. Pi confirmed that she would go and Yata gave permission. Haseo then glanced over at Endrance.

"Endrance, will you...?"

"Leave me," Endrance said curtly. It seemed he had no interest in working with G.U.. Endrance seemed to have given up on everything. He walked away from the Serpent of Lore, swaying this way and that way, like a sick person. No one approached him, and no one tried to stop him.



Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN BULWARK. MORRIGU
BARROW WALL

When Kuhn, Pi, and Haseo reached Morrighu Barrow Wall, they had to wait for Nala of the Seven Counsel. He was the captain who had mediated between the Sakaki faction and the Zelkova faction in the guild. He was a calm, slender, white-haired yet young Lord Partisan.

“Sorry for making you wait,” Nala said.

“Nala,” Kuhn greeted him. It seemed like Nala was going to be representing Moon Tree.

“This strange red sign. The one with the three sides on the wall...” Nala invited them to look. It was the sign of Tri-Edge.

Pi spoke to them in the party chat: “Let’s check to be sure... This is another server after all.”

The four of them filed down a narrow path parallel to the wall. The vast length of Morrighu Barrow Wall disappeared off into the infinite distance. This was a part of a Lost Ground that players could visit.

“Someone is here,” Nala muttered. They hid in the shadows.

Soon, the words of a song reached them: “*Morrighu Barrow Wall has no beginning and no end. If you want to find out, why don’t you go? What is carved into your heart... is not something that I know.*”

It sounded like a drunken old man. It actually was a giant dog-man.

“Gabi?!” Kuhn sounded more than a little surprised to see the Guild Master of Kestrel here. He had once been a member of the PK guild.

Why would the Guild Master of Kestrel be here?

But there was an even bigger surprise waiting. When Haseo looked at the man Gabi was with...

“Ovan?!” Haseo screamed and jumped out from behind the rock.

“Oh ho! It’s you!” Gabi grinned and opened both arms. He motioned for him to jump into his arms.

“Ovan! What are you doing here?!”

“Don’t know!”

“That’s not you!”

Gabi was irritating, and Ryo was enraged at Ovan. This was the Guild Master of the Twilight Brigade, of which Haseo had once been a member. Haseo looked through the colored glasses and into the eyes of the man with the strange arm.

“An old friend, you could say.”

“Ovan once made an oath!”

“Hah?”

“Sorry, who are you again?”

Gabi looked at Haseo and cocked his head like a kitten curiously eyeing a new plaything.

“Freak!” Ryo was intensely irritated at this reunion of Ovan’s.

“It’s Haseo! He is like a brother to me.”

"So you're my kid brother?"

"What is this... Argh! Whatever! Ovan, do you understand what's going on?!"

"This is an AIDA server, right? G.U. member," Ovan answered flatly.

Both Kuhn and Pi were speechless. Pi was visibly shocked. Had they been discovered? First, Zelkova of Moon Tree had known. And now Ovan knew. G.U. was supposed to be a top-secret project of CC Corps, but now ordinary players seemed to know about it.

"Well I guess that speeds things up if you already know. And we have a bone to pick with you, old man! Kestrel, your little lackeys have been panicking everyone. PKing anywhere they can. Do something about them!"

"That's what *The World* is!" Gabi howled.

Ordinarily, Kuhn seemed to know everything and know how to handle anything, but in front of Gabi and Ovan, he seemed at a loss. "Gabi..." Kuhn tried a different approach with his old guild mate. "None of the PCs who've been PKed have rezzed. We don't know what's happened to their players in real life. It could be bad..."

"There have been sacrifices! This is not a game. This is real." Haseo thrust his weapon towards Gabi in rage.

"Yes, Master Haseo. This is not the time for weapons," Nala of Moon Tree reproached him.

"Ngh." Haseo grunted, unwilling to step down. Haseo's goal was to save people. Not to be defeated, not to yield.

"Even if you take Master Gabi down now, it will not stop the PKing," Nala said.

"Nala?"

"See, Gabi." Nala's words were well received by Ovan. "You should be good friends with Gabi, Haseo. He's a very scary enemy, but a very good ally..."

"Tee hee."

"There isn't anyone as reliable as him." Ovan smirked.

Gabi sniggered, he seemed to be enjoying the praise.

"I am Nala of Moon Tree. You are Master Gabi, and you must be Master Ovan. Our aim is to escape from this AIDA server."

"Oh, so he's getting help from ordinary players now," Ovan said. He was taking about Yata.

Pi stepped forward. "Our research into how to escape from the AIDA server has led us to believe—"

"What is on the other side of this wall?" Ovan asked, ignoring the conversation.

"Nothing," Pi answered quickly.

Ovan touched the sign of Tri-Edge that was carved into the Morrigu Barrow Wall. "What makes you say that?"

"There are no graphics in locations where players can't view normally. The wall is to reduce the graphics needed."

"Just what Yata would say."

Pi blushed. She didn't like the way this conversation was going.

Ovan approached her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Morrigu Barrow has no end and no beginning. That's what the

poem says. Some people have compared it to an Uroboros. Nothing, huh? You could say that, but this wall is the wall which divides this world from another world.” Ovan seemed to want to pick a fight with the troubled Pi. “Research! Heh heh! Yata was never straight about things.” There was malice in Ovan’s tone. Ovan glanced over at Haseo and the others to catch their reaction.

“What do you mean, Ovan?” Haseo demanded.

“Yata already knows. He knows how to get off the AIDA server.” Ovan’s answer shocked Haseo.

“What?!”

“He’s not right, is he, Pi?” Kuhn whispered in Pi’s ear. Pi stayed quiet, though. She had no comeback for the allegations.

Ovan looked like he was having fun upsetting the female Tribal Grappler.

“This whole AIDA server is supposed to be an imitation of the regular CC Corp server. If that’s the case, then there must be an operations folder that governs the whole system. You should be able to use the operations folder to move the PC data back to the original server. Project G.U. is under the direct control of the highest level of CC Corps. Yata is responsible for this and knows *The World*, back to front. He would have known this.”

“Operations folder?” Haseo didn’t know this specialized term but it was enough to make him doubt the people he had trusted.

“Pi, is this true?!” Kuhn was the first to ask.

Pi said nothing.

“If it’s true, why didn’t Yata say anything?!” Kuhn asked.

Pi averted her eyes. Her feelings were expressed through the motions of her PC. The lie had been discovered, and it was clear who had the guilty conscience. "It was because Yata wasn't sure yet..." Pi tried to excuse Yata.

"Is that the truth, Pi? Are you sure it wasn't because Yata didn't want to escape the AIDA server?" Ovan kept pushing Pi.

Pi was obviously distressed now. "There are a lot of PCs trapped on the server that's locked down by the AIDA. People's fear, sorrow, doubt, and rage... All human emotion is here. There isn't much better fieldwork to find out the effects of AIDA infection on the PC and player, right? This is just like..."

"An observation test."

Gabi's words only served to enrage Haseo more. He automatically unleashed his anger on Pi. "Are we just guinea pigs?! Research... Yata was just using the players for human testing?!"

"Wait! Listen!"

"Stop this, Master Haseo."

"Leave it." Kuhn held Haseo back.

Haseo had a tendency to act rashly online. Especially ever since he came to this AIDA server, he had found it extremely difficult to keep a hold on his emotions. Perhaps it was because he felt trapped. No matter how mentally strong someone was, being imprisoned would break them down in the end. This was also combined with an inability to perceive his real physical body anymore. His sanity had been pushed to its limits.

"Sorry."

"It's all right. But Pi, I feel the same way that Haseo does." Kuhn turned to Pi as he spoke. "What is Yata going to do with Atoli? What is he going to do with all the players who've been PKed and not rezzed? He's a CC Corp GM, right? You're from the same company, right? But you let all these people get caught up in this... What was he thinking?!" Kuhn was hurt. He worked part-time for CC Corp too.

"I will ask Yata." She was probably in a personal chat with Yata now. It was her way of escaping the interrogation.

"And to you, Moon Tree, I am terribly sorry." Kuhn bowed his head to Nala.

"The spirit of cooperation is necessary at times such as these."

"Thank you." Kuhn looked up from his bow and now turned to Gabi. "Gabi, talk to the members of Kestrel. I want the PKing to stop. Is it possible?"

"Sure!" The great red giant nodded.

Haseo was stunned.

Even Kuhn seemed taken aback for a second. "Right. I can believe you, can't I? Gabi?" Kuhn wanted a promise, but Gabi didn't make any reaction either way.

"Ovan..." Haseo turned to Ovan. "You know Yata?"

"We are old friends," Ovan replied. "Leave it to me!" The mature nature of the conversation was starting to fade.

Pi returned then. "A message has been received from HQ."

"What was Yata's excuse?" Haseo demanded to know.

"Let's leave the argument for later. Yata has thought of a way to escape the AIDA server." Pi had returned to her usual bossy self.

“Really?” Kuhn asked for reassurance.

“Yes. Some preparation is necessary. I will return to the @HOME.”

“Let’s go, Haseo,” Kuhn said.

“Okay.”

Haseo didn’t want to leave Ovan here with questions unanswered, but this time, he had to retreat for Atoli and the other players.

“Haseo.” The voice calling his name was gentle.

Haseo couldn’t move. He had been easy prey when he had logged in for the very first time. Ovan had been like an older brother to him in the Twilight Brigade, and Haseo had respected him. Haseo couldn’t ignore that voice. He couldn’t forget.

“What are you acting on? Reason or experience?” Ovan’s attitude was exactly the same as it had been in the Brigade.

“I don’t know! How should I know?”

“That answer isn’t wrong. Neither reason nor experience is enough.” Ovan spoke to Haseo like a child. Gabi hooted.

Pi and Kuhn watched Ovan, both on their guard.

“Investigating with reason and investigating with experience—both are correct and both are wrong. They are both necessary. I told you that when you were in the Brigade. There are theories, and those theories need to be proved. In doing so, other theories will be born. With reflection, the flaws will become clear. Then, you will establish new theories. When you overcome the flaws in your theory, you will reach a higher level.”

Awareness and reflection were needed to grow, to overcome defects. Taking comfort was not going to achieve anything.

Ryo hadn't understood fully, but Ovan's words had become a prison.

"Mind and body. Player and PC. Haseo... You have awareness on two levels, and so you obtained the power of an Avatar. Unlike your imprisoned body, your mind has no ties to the law of cause and effect. You have already let go of common thought. Morals are freer on the Internet. On the Internet, even your body can overcome the laws of cause and effect."

"Epitaph-PC..." This was a vessel of the mind. The black box that linked human understanding, a Morganna factor, and the PC together.

"That's right, Haseo! An Epitaph User can surpass human understanding when in *The World*."

It's what he had hoped for...

"Reach unimaginable heights." Ovan's voice betrayed his excitement. It was as if he were talking about himself. "Temporarily step into another world. A world where the mind and body are separate. A loose spirit, wondering *The World*. Something that not science, psychologists, or philosophers can explain. *The World* needs to be studied. The only thing we can be certain of is that its creator, Harald Hoerwick, was a genius. A genius that has still not been surpassed. Think as much as you need. Are we really here?"

Cogito Ergo Sum was basically what he was saying.

"I think, therefore I am."

AIDA SERVER

“However, your own existence is not certain. You are sure you exist. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have that power. That was just the beginning of the story. Where you take your power will be your story, Haseo.”

Try...

Turning round, Ovan disappeared at the terminal.

Gabi bade farewell and also disappeared through the terminal.

Haseo was once again left behind by Ovan.

“Let’s go, Haseo.”

“Kuhn.”

“Don’t worry about that idiot now. We have something we need to do.” Kuhn rested his hand on Haseo’s shoulder.

This guy has got to be on my side, Ryo thought to himself.

Using a debug command, Pi transported the party out of there.



Nara had watched the whole meeting. “Ovan, what are you planning?” Nara muttered as he inspected the signs on the walls of the barrow.



Back at the Serpent of Lore, Yata and Kuhn were having a heated debate.

"Explain! Why didn't you say anything about the operations folder?!" Kuhn yelled. He beat his fist down on the table, hard.

"It was only a guess. I didn't want to confuse you." Yata didn't rise to the fight. He kept calm; he always did.

"Whatever! And this research? It's just testing on humans! Why didn't you prioritize the players' safety?!"

"G.U.'s job is to understand the AIDA phenomenon," Pi reproached Kuhn for siding on with the players too much. It was okay behavior for a User Support G.M., but for an Epitaph User of G.U. to say such things was less than satisfactory.

"Kuhn." Yata glared at him. "I do not agree with you." Yata had completely denied Kuhn. Kuhn couldn't find the words to respond. "Is deleting one or two AIDA going to help us understand the problem? No. G.U.'s purpose is not to do detective work to chase some murderer called Tri-Edge. It is not about personal feelings or grudges. It is not about saving individuals."

Yata was sort of right. Haseo and Kuhn both knew this, so they listened without argument.

"I just want to protect *The World*," Kuhn muttered indignantly.

"Yata, I don't like the way you do things. Everything is always secretive." Haseo sided with Kuhn.

"Haseo..."

"But the reason that I'm here is because I want to save Shino, Atoli, and the other Lost Ones. I have to choose the best path I can for that."

An information window opened from the Serpent of Lore, as if to interrupt Haseo's words. It was a video feed of Moon Tree's @HOME, which was basically a refugee camp now. They could hear the sobs of the players.

"There is nowhere to run to. While we're on the AIDA server, we don't even have the real world to escape to!"

"What about the PKing?"

"Kestrel seems to have suddenly put a stop to the PKing," Yata replied. Gabi had kept his promise.

"He is a good leader. But he doesn't control all five thousand members of Kestrel."

Kuhn had been the deputy guild master of Kestrel. In these extreme circumstances, only Gabi could stop Kestrel and the chaos they were creating.

The information window then showed Mac Anu. The scene it showed was terrifying. In the evening sky, bubbles floated. Shadows, like the AIDA anomalies.

"This isn't a few AIDA. G.U. is a research team. We have to understand everything about the AIDA if we are to avoid these disasters. We need to observe and have first-hand experience if we are to understand the general rules of their behavior."

The path to returning the Lost Ones was to understand the AIDA. That was what Yata was saying. Observation and experience. G.U. was a research team, after all.

"The scientist, and the virus under a microscope—but who is watching who?" Yata muttered to himself as he looked at the scene.

Does he mean that the AIDA are watching us?

Haseo felt that he had a lot more to understand about the AIDA. Up until now, he had always considered them to be like an unknown virus that got people sick. Considering that they also existed in *The World*, then that meant that there was a character called AIDA.

"How are we going to escape the AIDA server?" Haseo asked Yata.

Ovan said that Yata knew a way off the server. Even if he couldn't trust Yata, surely he could trust Ovan?

"To return the PCs to the CC Corp server, we need to force the command. To do that, we need to infiltrate the AIDA server's operations folder," Yata answered.

The information window changed to Morrigu Barrow Wall, where they had just been. Nala wasn't there anymore, and the area was empty.

"Security hole!" Haseo realized.

The sign of Tri-Edge created a window from their side to that side.



EIGHT

△ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN BULWARK. MORRIGU
BARROW WALL

Haseo, Pi, and Kuhn made a party and returned to Morrigu Barrow Wall.

“We’ll be escaping out of the AIDA server from here.” Pi sounded nervous as she spoke.

“What do we do?” Haseo asked.

Haseo didn’t have any specialized knowledge of programs or the network. The stuff he did know had all come from school lessons, magazines, and forums. Anyway, Pi was a CC Corp system engineer.

“We will use the sign of Tri-Edge,” Pi explained as she looked at the mark carved in the wall. The mark blinked red as she spoke. “This has the ability to act as an illegal teleport point.”

To specialists like Pi and Yata, the graphics of the three-sided symbol didn’t really mean much. What was important was the programs structural analysis.

“It was from here that we were teleported to the coin locker area.”

“Perhaps this AIDA chaos gate. This is a hole in the original CC Corp server, and so it is also a hole in the AIDA server. Yata combined this hole with a transport program. Haseo, Pi, and Kuhn, as Epitaph Users, will infiltrate the operations folder from this sign.”

Those had been Yata’s orders.

“Then we’ll be back in the original CC Corp server.”

They could return to the real world. The players would be released from the AIDA’s hypnosis and be able to perceive their real bodies again.

"The problem is that we don't know where the operations folder is on the AIDA server." The stress in Pi's voice was evident. "We may come into contact with AIDA. This could be dangerous for any PC who wasn't an Epitaph User."

No one could predict how AIDA-infected data may present itself. Epitaph Users who had awoken could resist an AIDA attack, but there was no certainty that they would survive it.

"This is how we're going to get back to the real world. And maybe we will be able to get Atoli back, too," Kuhn said. Kuhn seemed to be regretting the things he had said to Yata, now.

>> DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, KUHN. I'M USED TO BEING TOLD OFF BY MY SUPERIORS.

Haseo and Kuhn spoke with each other in a private chat. Even though it was a private chat window, there was a good likelihood that Yata could see it, so they made sure not to say anymore than that.

Pi stood in front of the sign.

"Your Avatars..."

"In an illegal place, use illegal power..." Haseo clenched his fist.

The three of them summoned their Avatars.

"I'm beginning the hack. We will now infiltrate the operations folder."

They would attack using a transport program. They would run the program and find a way off this server.



AIDA Server Operations Folder

They were swimming. Swimming in a digital space made up of complicated procedures, formulas, programs, and hidden circuits. Everything was connected with gold; they moved at the speed of light. It was white, like a transparent dark. And everything was almost painfully simple.

Pi had Tarvos.

Kuhn had Magus.

And Haseo had Skeith. The feeling of holding an Avatar in this strange, unknown space, inhabited by formula fish and shoals of light, was the only thing keeping him sane.

“Is this the operations folder?”

“No, this is just a data route,” Pi answered Haseo.

Ryo didn't understand the formulas, commands, or the geometric symbols. Pi was taking great care to check everything.

Haseo could feel they were moving somewhere. “You can read it?” Haseo asked in surprise.

“I can smell it.” Pi pulled a face that Haseo couldn't read. “This is too weak. We need to get up to get to a higher level.” She directed the group, moving like a pink mermaid. Pi started to swim upward through the sea of data.

“So if all goes well, how do we run the operation command?” Kuhn asked Pi as he followed her.

“The teleport program that Yata put together... Leave that to me. You’ll manage the backup.”

“Of course, princess.”

“You’re not exactly a knight in shining armor.”

The two of them chatted away.

>>DID YOU KNOW THAT PI IS HOT IN REAL LIFE?

A personal chat from Kuhn jumped up. It seemed like he was trying to ease his nerves during this tense mission.

>>THE OLD WOMAN?

I’VE ONLY MET HER ONCE.

>>ONCE? CC CORP IS IN TOKYO, RIGHT? KUHN, WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

IN REAL LIFE? KANAZAWA.

>>WOW, THAT’S FAR. YOU JUST DO YOUR WORK ONLINE? I LIVE IN TOKYO.

AIDA SERVER

I WANT TO MOVE TO TOKYO SOON. LET'S MEET
IN REAL LIFE.

“Leave the chit-chat for later!” Pi had been listening in and scolded them. She may have been a beauty in real life, but she was either embarrassed or didn't care.

They had been swimming for some time.

“Here.” Pi was indicating a sort of nerve center where all the lines were collecting. She swam over. It didn't look like she was wrong. It certainly did appear to be the center of it all.

Pi struck the program with Tarvos. It was a door-opening charm. As a Tribal Grappler, she could also use magic.

Finally, the three Epitaph Users entered the Operations Folder. This was the center of the AIDA server.



Haseo was standing in a chalk white space. “So is this the operations folder?”

There was no light or formula-fish swimming in here. This was most definitely not an area designed for players to ever see.

In the middle was what looked like a round terminal. Around this terminal, circling like satellites, were small spheres. There

wasn't much point in what it looked like. That Pi was here was enough.

"This is it," Pi said, standing under the round terminal. She then went quiet as she started to operate the transfer command. A huge amount of data was suddenly transferred. The program, which Yata had created in a relatively short space of time, clearly had done the job.

"Pi, how much longer now?"

"A little more... It needs to get from two hundred to two hundred and forty."

He read a little of Yata's program, the command. From the spheres, an artificial voice of the operations folder responded to the commands the program was giving it. If the AIDA server was a simple copy of the CC Corp server, it shouldn't be too complicated a task for a CC Corp engineer like Pi.

But then suddenly there was a burning sensation on the bottom of Haseo's feet. He got ready to move. The white floor was slowly bubbling up with black bubbles.

"AIDA!" Kuhn shouted a warning. The black bubbles started to cover the operations folder.

"No! Is this a trap?!" Pi turned pale.

Was this the AIDA's security?

Something then crept out of the hole.

"A fish?!" Haseo couldn't understand this. Out of the space opening up came a massive fish.

"Gate keeper... The doorman of the network!" Pi screamed.

AIDA SERVER

Haseo couldn't target it. Had the AIDA infected the center of the system? Was this the AIDA that had taken the form of a monster?

"It's huge!"

"Lake master?"

Kuhn and Haseo looked up at the floating fish, gob-smacked. It was almost the size of a killer whale. If this was the Gate Keeper, then it controlled the information traffic through the system and granted access permissions.

The giant fish, upon discovering the Epitaph Users, started twisting its half-transparent body violently.

"Our access has been denied."

"I'm not stopping! Kuhn! You two deal with it!" Pi yelled her orders.

"It's coming at us!"

Just as Kuhn finished his warning, the giant fish above their heads swooshed down, its mouth wide open. It was going to eat them.

Haseo skillfully dodged and then launched his counter attack. "Kuhn?!"

Kuhn's body was consumed. PCs were nothing to this fish. The giant fish swirled around like a shark that had caught its prey. It was smeared in black bubbles.

"I don't care if you're a fish or a shark!" Haseo tightened his grip on Skeith.

From the mud, there was a green light.

"Leaf Guard!"

From Magus, the giant spear Kuhn wielded, grew a glowing shield of leaves. It stopped the giant fish's mouth from closing.

"My Magus does offense and defense!"

Kuhn looked like a comic book hero, the way he had used his spear to stop the fish's mouth from closing down on him. He looked like he was being boiled in the black bubbles. He flicked back his long, ponytailed hair.

"What pierces is my will!" His mind was completely concentrated in that second. All his power was focused on the spear.

"New Green Light!"

His Avatar now became a skewer, piercing the giant fish AIDA. It spat black bubble blood and it swam around, clinging for its life.

"AAAAARGGGGH!"

Haseo then made the killing blow with Skeith, piercing the fish's gills.

Then Haseo realized what it was that the giant fish had spat out.

"Atoli?!" Kuhn realized. What the fish had spat out was the PC who had been lost to the AIDA in the coin locker area.

"Atoli..." Haseo ran to Atoli, who was lying on the floor. He held her.

"Ugh." Atoli made a meek groan. She looked miserable, like a bird that had been caught in an oil slick. Haseo stroked her face, rubbing off the dirt.

"The command is complete," Pi yelled.

Everything happened at once. Nothing could stop the transfer command now. Pi and Kuhn were transferred.

As were the members of Moon Tree, Kestrel's Gabi, the PKers, the PCs, Ovan and Yata... even Haseo and Atoli's data. Everything was transferred, like a ball of wool, unwinding.

What?! Haseo held his breath.

Within all this, the giant fish Gate Keeper that Haseo had just defeated rose up again.

I can't move...

Ryo was baffled. In the transport, Haseo was not moving to Ryo's will. The giant fish once again came for him and Atoli, but this time he was totally defenseless.

He was a goner.

Then something shined in the corner of Haseo's eye.

The AIDA was deleted in one attack.

Something appeared in the space.

Who is that?

Haseo strained his eyes to work out who it was.

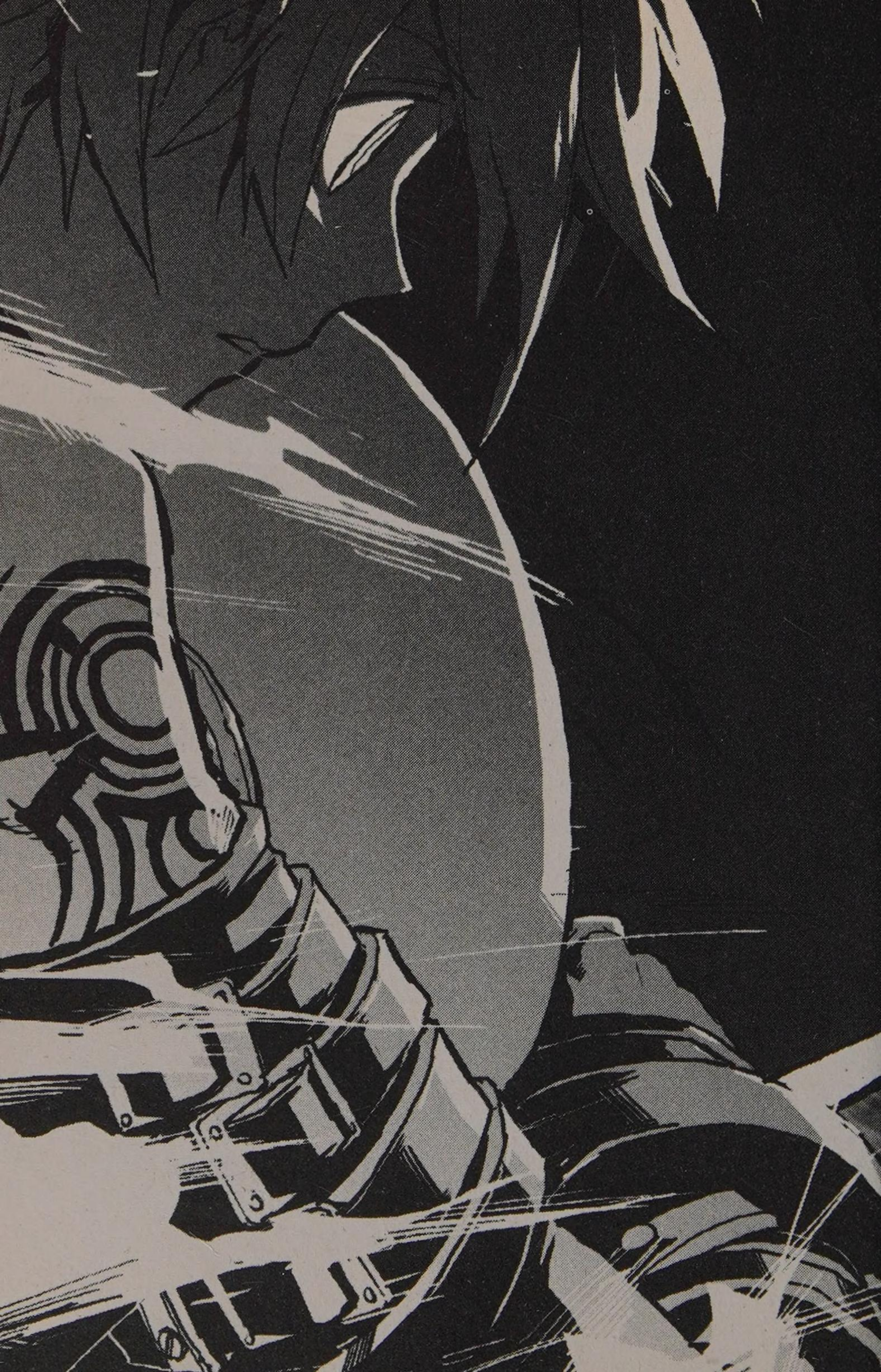
It was a PC. A PC with Twin Swords. Twin Swords covered in blue flames. Haseo saw him.

The Zombie glared right back.

But I defeated you! Haseo screamed internally.

It was Azure Kite. The same Azure Kite that Haseo had already defeated.

Tri-Edge...





He couldn't vocalize his thoughts before he and Atoli were transported away.

He opened his eyes.

Ryo Misaki was sprawled out across his desk.

He took the M2D display from his head and wiped away his drool. The program had undergone a forced quit and the screen had returned to the desktop.

On the floor was the wireless controller.

Am I back?

This was certainly his room.

Ryo let out a sigh of relief. He was back in the real world. It was probably the same for the other players too, including Atoli.

How long were we there for? Half a day... No a full day.

It had felt a lot longer than that, without a display and controller.

There was no way of judging time accurately in *The World*, either. There was no regular movement of the sun or clocks.

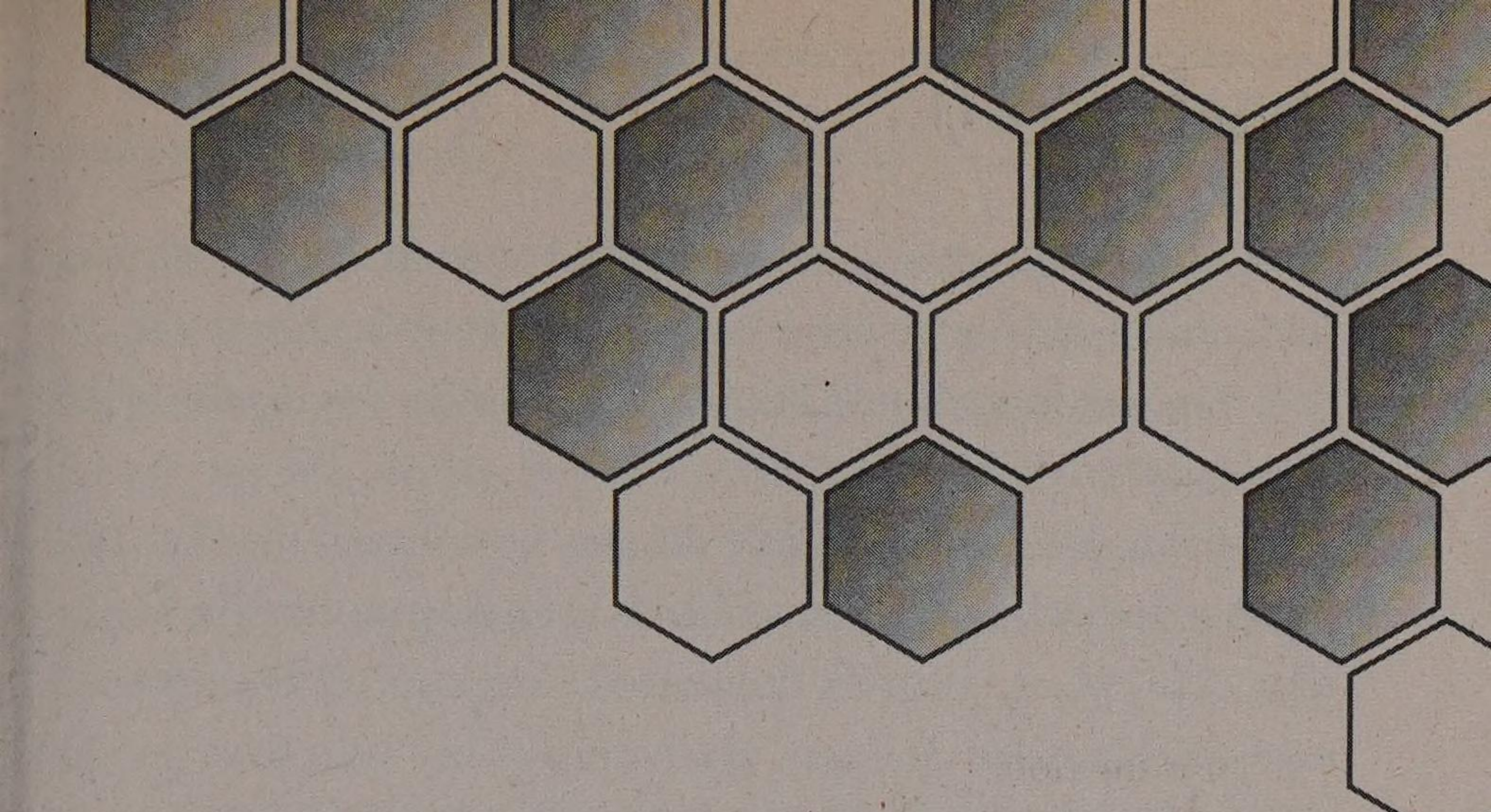
From the window, he could see fireworks in the distance. They were lighting up the sky near the riverbed.

Fireworks...

"You again, cripple."

"Don't go there!" a voice called out.

Ryo leaned out the window. He could see some of his classmates walking toward the station on the road below. He was confused. The fireworks had been that night. The invitation to go with them had also been tonight. That all had happened a long time ago...



CHAPTER TWO: REIKO SAEKI

ONE

She rarely came to Ikebukuro. It was where the JR, the underground and the private suburban networks, met. There was a department store near the station. There was a movie theatre, an electrical store, and a bookstore. Anything you could want. It also retained some of old Tokyo. Other than the underground passage from the station to Sunshine City, there hadn't been massive development like there had been at Marunouchi and the bay areas. In summer, the place was full of teenagers. It really hadn't changed much.

The stench of the gutter wafted up.

It was very hot today. As global warming took its toll on the world, it had been almost normal for it to hit 95 degrees in August. She had been really sensitive to smells lately. It was nearly her time of the month. The smell of the summer fish market hit her nostrils. She

grew up in a fishing town and loved fish. The sushi and sashimi they sold in the supermarket never smelt fresh enough for her to eat.

She wandered around Ikebukuro, not really knowing where she was headed.

In her heels, almost half of the men were shorter than her. She wondered what they thought of her in her gray pantsuit. She always wore dark colors, whatever the season. She never felt the desire to wear anything else. She also liked wearing her hair short in the summer. She thought it felt nice to blow-dry like that.

This was Reiko Saeki—Pi's player was back in the real world too.

She was going over the facts of the AIDA server incident. By running the transport command in the operations folder, all the PCs on the AIDA server had been returned back to the original CC Corp server. As a result, those players became aware of their real selves again; they were back in their bodies and free from their confinement in an AIDA game.

Reiko had also been returned to reality.

But Reiko had been surprised when she woke up. Time hadn't moved on much further than when they had entered the coin locker area from Morrigu Barrow Wall. All of what she had remembered happening on the AIDA server had happened over the space of a very few minutes in the real world.

Yata's theory was that, having been removed from my physical body and dropped in the very small structure of an MMO, the players' mental processing abilities must have sped up. This made the passage of time go quicker.

As far as Yata was concerned, it was a rare phenomenon. It was the brain's way of escaping from what had happened to its body. There was also a phenomenon experienced on the AIDA servers that felt like lag. It was because the AIDA server specs were not high enough to cope with the rapid thought processes of the players' consciousnesses. Yata would use this as an allegory, perhaps. Scientists would draw their conclusions.

>>WE HAVE STUDIED THE INCIDENT. HOWEVER,
IT WAS THE SAME AIDA.

The scientists and the AIDA under the microscope.

Who was watching who?

The AIDA server incident hadn't made the news. Lots of players had lost consciousness as a result of the incident, but the vast majority who thought *The World* was nothing more than a game had put it down to playing too much. They believed they were tired, or it had just been a daydream. Most players had found their own explanations. The official message boards and other major message boards occasionally had posts regarding the incidents, but all the problems they described about not being able to log-out and the PKing that was possible in the Root Towns were reported as false information. Those who said that the game had stolen their souls or that it had been possible to die in a game were ridiculed as being into the occult. All the threads were then closed.

The Seven Counsel of Moon Tree that understood the incident kept their promise and remained quiet about Project G.U.; they even ridiculed people who spoke the truth about the AIDA server incident.

The truth was brushed under the carpet, just as CC Corp had wanted. There was just a two line announcement on the main site of *The World R:2*, stating that at the time there had been some network trouble but it was fixed now. The incident was over.

Rieko went into a coffee shop. She purchased a bottle of mineral water and chose a seat where she could easily see the entrance.

The upper management of CC Corp had put more pressure on G.U. than even during the AIDA server incident. This was the first time that they had been so anxious for a resolution that they'd de-emphasized the research aspect of their duties.

In 2015, during the previous version of *The World*, and two years before the AIDA phenomenon had really been understood, Project G.U. was originally set up as an organization to count the AIDA. She thought about "RA Plan (Rebirth Aura)" and sighed.

The man in charge of G.U. then was called Jun Banshouya.

CARPENTER'S FILE: FIFTH INTERIM REPORT—
AURA'S DISAPPEARANCE

REIKO SAEKI

THE YEARS FROM 2011 TO 2014 WERE THE GOLDEN YEARS OF *THE WORLD*. THAT WAS THE EXACT TIME THAT AURA EXISTED. *THE WORLD* WAS AN INTERNET GAME MANAGED BY THE ULTIMATE AI INSTEAD OF HUMANS. THIS WAS NEVER MADE PUBLIC THOUGH, AND EVEN AT CC CORPORATION, THIS FACT WAS KNOWN BY A VERY LIMITED NUMBER OF PEOPLE.

FIRST OF ALL, IT WASN'T AS IF WE COMPLETELY UNDERSTOOD AND GRASPED THE EXISTENCE OF THE UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED SYSTEM AI, AURA. IT WAS BETTER THAT THE REGULAR PLAYERS WERE NOT AWARE OF THIS. AURA WAS REALLY THE BEST ADMINISTRATOR FOR *THE WORLD*, AS SHE INHERITED THE WISDOM OF THE GENIUS HARALD HOERWICK AND THE BEAUTY OF THE POET EMMA WIELANT. SHE WAS AN EFFICIENT DEBUGGER AND OCCASIONALLY EVEN BEHAVED AS A FUSSY CREATOR. WHILE SHE ACTED AS THE SOLE GOD, SHE ALSO ACTED AS A FUN GODDESS OF A FICKLE POLYTHEISM. FOR EXAMPLE, MAKING A REPLICA OF THE HERO KITE'S CHARACTER AND RUNNING A GIFT CAMPAIGN WAS NOT CC CORPORATION'S PLAN, BUT AURA'S. SHE TOOK A TEST PLAY OF THE BRACELET-WEARING HERO AND PUT IT IN THE GAME.

WE CAN ONLY GUESS WHEN AURA WAS LOST. IT WAS PROBABLY THE END OF 2014, ON THE SEVENTH ANNIVERSARY OF PLUTO'S KISS AND FOUR YEARS AFTER THE MORGANNA INCIDENT. PROBLEMS STARTED TO OCCUR IN *THE WORLD*. THERE WERE FREQUENT SERVER FAILURES AND LAGS THAT HINDERED PLAY. THE ACCIDENTS WERE NOT LIMITED ONLY TO *THE WORLD*, BUT INFECTED THE ENTIRE NETWORK, AND THE INCREASE IN PROCESS BURDENS AND HUMAN TROUBLES SUDDENLY INCREASED DRASTICALLY.

STARTING WITH THE RESEARCH COMPANY NAB, MANY INSTITUTIONS BEGAN TO INVESTIGATE THE CAUSES. BUT UNEXPECTEDLY, UNLIKE THE FORMER NETWORK CRISIS, NO EVIDENCE OF A NEW INTERNET VIRUS OR 'NET TERROR WAS FOUND. IT IS THOUGHT THAT WITH THE LOSS OF THE ULTIMATE AI AURA, THE FUNDAMENTAL SPECS SIMPLY RETURNED TO THE ORIGINAL STATE. IN THE BEGINNING OF 2015, THE BOARD OF CC CORPORATION FINALLY GRASPED THE SITUATION.

WITH THIS, ALONG WITH THE QUIET BUT CERTAIN DECAY OF THE NETWORK, *THE WORLD* WENT INTO THE DARK AGES. *THE WORLD* LOST THE FAITH OF PLAYERS AND ITS REPUTATION WAS RAPIDLY DECREASING.

GUARDIAN UBIQUITOUS... AURA... SHE NEEDED TO BE PROTECTED.

THERE WAS A VERY LIMITED NUMBER OF PEOPLE THAT KNEW OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LOSS OF HER AND THE NETWORK TROUBLE. THEN THE CC CORPORATION BOARD MADE A DECISION. THEY WERE TO REPRODUCE AURA. HOWEVER, THE FATHER OF AURA, WHO CREATED HER, HARALD HOERWICK, HAD ALREADY DIED. THE PLAN TO REVIVE AURA WAS CALLED THE "RA PLAN." AND SO THERE WAS A NEED FOR A NEW ORGANIZATION.

PROJECT G.U. WAS ESTABLISHED.



Jun... My older brother...

It had been Pi's, Rieko Saeki's, older brother.

Jun Banshouya had a different mother than Rieko did, but they had lived together for a time when they were younger. Rieko had been born in a lonely fishing town. Slowly, all her close relatives fell into trouble or disappeared—divorce, bank loans, accidents—just one horrible incident after horrible incident. But her grandmother and older brother were always on her side. Rieko had been a shy girl. Her brother was quite a bit older than her, and so he left to go to the big city. He graduated from a famous university and joined CC Corp as an engineer. He was everything that Rieko aspired to be.

Rieko followed in her brother's footsteps, graduated, and chose to be an engineer.

With all the family difficulties and the pressure of work, they didn't get a chance to see each other much, but Rieko had heard that Jun was working on a very important project for CC Corp.

However, in the summer of 2015, there was a fire at CC Corp, and Jun left the company. Rieko didn't really know any of what had happened during the half-year he had been responsible for Project G.U.. It was just a rumor, but people said the cause of the fire had been G.U., and that he had taken responsibility for it and quit. That was all she could find out.

About 80% of game data from *The World* was irretrievably lost in the fire. There were insurance problems with regards to the lost PC data, and the ensuing litigation hit the news. There was no doubt that the fire forced *R:2*'s development to be brought forward.

At the end of 2015, *R:2* opened to the public.

Rieko was reunited with her brother. Yet a few months later, he met his accidental death.

As if to replace her brother, Rieko was recruited by CC Corp on preferential terms. She had met Yata, and she had been handed the text her older brother had left behind.

This text was the Banshouya File.

It was a numbered report. The contents contained the surprising truth about the second generation MMO game system and *The World*. It recorded the start of Project G.U. and the “RA Plan.”

Rieko had then been given the Epitaph-PC, Pi, to revive Aura. It was the former Project G.U.’s inheritance. Or, in other words, it was a memento from her older brother—along with the six folders of the Banshouya File, of course.

She wanted to continue on in her brother’s memory and work to restore peace throughout the network and *The World*. That was what Pi and Rieko worked to achieve. Her Avatar, Tarvos, was the embodiment of this will. The RA Plan was in action again, and Rieko had to make it work. If the current network was not complete and there was a dangerous power lurking inside *The World* that had a hold over the network, then the ultimate AI, Aura, needed to be revived. This was all connected to solving the AIDA problem, which was the most pressing issue at the moment.

Other than her natural relatives, only Yata and the upper management of CC Corp knew that Rieko was related by blood to Banshouya.

Yata shared her aims, so she was loyal to him. Pi and Yata reformed Project G.U.. This great enterprise was full of the unforeseen, mystery, and danger. There were so many enemies working against them.

Ovan... Who is he?

He was a hacker. He was an excellent hacker, too. The system did not stop the illegal log-in. What things must a player who could use a cheat PC with that arm know about *The World*? What did Gabi of Kestrel and Zelkova of Moon Tree know? They knew too much. And what was Haseo, the Epitaph User of the Terror of Death, to Ovan?

"Are you Miss Saeki?" a nervous voice asked her.

She raised her head. "You must be Ryo Misaki?"

"That's right."

Ryo Misaki—she had known it was him as soon as she had laid eyes on the player of Haseo.

From the image of Haseo and her research on the player in real life, she had been able to imagine what he looked like. She had pictured a young, naïve boy. She hadn't exactly been looking forward to a face-to-face meeting, though.

Oh my...

The boy standing in front of her looked at her with the eyes of an abandoned puppy. He was a tired seventeen-year-old.

For half a year, Ryo Misaki had been fighting to save Shino Nanao, who had become a Lost One in *The World*. When it happened, he had discarded the real world and become a 'net-junkie. His friends and

family were at first worried, but he didn't ever want to leave *The World*, and in the end, they just gave up. There were no more words to say, and they just distanced themselves from it. No one could understand his lifestyle now, though. Ryo Misaki's insecurities were no longer ones anyone would anticipate a teenager to have. The pain in his heart of having such a heavy responsibility, working on G.U. with system administrators, and being aware of this unknown AIDA force... Rieko felt sorry for him.

She thought of ways to move the conversation forward to what she wanted to speak about.

Even though he was coming out to meet a girl, he hadn't made much effort with his hair or clothes.

What this boy needs isn't reasoning...

She stood up and hugged Ryo tightly to her.

Ryo's body tensed a little in surprise but softened into the embrace.

He needed comfort.

"I'm sorry."

It was quiet but confident.

He had probably been looking for the right words ever since they'd agreed to meet. What did he have to apologize for? She didn't know how to respond, but she didn't press him. Without words, she had seen Ryo's thoughts.

"He's okay. Endrance's player had recovered his consciousness," Rieko said.

Ryo breathed a sign of relief. There was a tear forming in the corner of his eye.

“What’s the matter?” She tried to comfort him “He’s okay. I’m an idiot. It wasn’t you who made Endrance Lost One. You don’t have to apologize. It wasn’t your fault. You saved him. You saved the first Lost One in this AIDA incident.”

To those around them, it looked like an office lady and a schoolboy embracing and crying. People were starting to look at them with interest.

Leave us alone. We’re busy! Pi thought to herself.

“What about Atoli?!”

“It’s okay. Atoli’s player...”

Rieko slowly let Ryo go and indicated that he should sit. Ryo nodded and sat down.

Good. He’s a good student. Now he looks less like they were dating and more like he was having an interview for a part-time job, Pi thought to herself.

Rieko took some paperwork out from her brief case. The papers had been folded so as to hide any personal information, and only the photos were visible.

“This girl...?”

Ryo was looking at a particular picture of a girl around the same age as him.

“This is Atoli’s player.”

“Atoli’s...!” Ryo looked closer at the photo.

“You shouldn’t really see this. That’s why I can only let you see her photo. She’s a freshman in high school. A grade lower than you. You should be able to understand the player more. She’s real and not just in *The World*.”

Rieko was telling him to keep her and this image special.

Ryo stared at the picture; he wasn't going to forget the image of Atoli's player—Chigusa Kusaka.

She's cute, if a little sad-looking. Rieko grimaced. If she thought too much about things, it scared her.

Haseo wanted to be an adult so badly. He was so much more of a man than her ex-boyfriend, who had no ambition and would simply mope about his lot in life. Haseo would never run away. That was more important to Rieko than anything.

"I'm sorry. I know you would rather be speaking to someone else about this."

"She... Atoli, she's okay, isn't she?" Haseo asked her.

"Yes. Atoli's player had lost consciousness, but after a few hours, she recovered, like us."

This was information about Chigusa Kusaka that the investigation department had obtained.

"That's a relief."

"But..." Rieko's tone was measured.

Ryo's expression darkened when he heard what she had to say next.



TWO

The defeated gods fled to Airceltraï, the City of Dawn, with Morrigu Barrow Wall sealing the passage to heaven. They had lost

their power and defenses. A sinister shadow appeared, and fearful demons ran amok. There were only five cities left after the trail of destruction. One young Wavemaster, who was particularly skilled offered his life to the gods on the alter in Arche Koeln Waterfall.

A miracle happened.

Of the gods who had fled to the heavens, eight compassionate gods heard his prayer and came to him: Vulcan, the spirit of fire; Merrows, the spirit of water; Krake, the spirit of wood; Yarthkins, the spirit of earth; Lanceor, the spirit of thunder; Wryneck, the spirit of darkness; the goddess of the stars, Anu; and finally Aurora, the goddess of light. These eight gods heard the people and sealed away the shadow.

People were back on the path of prosperity.

However, now that the battle with the shadow was over, the greedy humans started to fight among themselves. The gods were ashamed of them; one by one, they left the earth.

Humanity was afraid that they had lost the light once more. So in their fear, they sealed the final remaining god, Aurora—who had been the kindest to them—in Hulle Granz Cathedral. The foolishness of humanity did not stop there, though. Later, they would use the power of the goddess for the Crest Gun to burn the gods in heaven.



Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN RADIATION. ARCHE
KOELN WATERFALL

Arche Koeln Waterfall was one of the earliest Lost Grounds discovered. The giant waterfall was the holy ground where the battle with the shadow took place. There was a shrine carved in the rock at the foot of the waterfall. Above it was a bridge made of stone, elevated to a dizzying height. The water had started to erode it. The bridge that joined the two shores was in a state of disrepair.

Two PCs transported in from the terminal, appearing on the bridge surrounded in the white water mist.

It was the Adept Rogue, Haseo, all dressed in black. Ryo Misaki had returned to *The World*. From the AIDA server, through Yata, he had returned to level-I33 and his third form. On the display, he was the demon known as the PKKer, the Terror of Death. A system administrator PC had manipulated it, and Haseo had been fitted with a debug mode. Things like levels didn't mean anything to Ryo now.

Using the controller, Ryo moved Haseo into the mist.

"Kuhn? Where are you?"

Kuhn had e-mailed Ryo, asking for a meeting.

"Ah! You're here," Kuhn replied. He sounded as relaxed as ever.

A shadow emerged from the mist—two shadows.

"Atoli!"

Standing beside Steam Gunner Kuhn was the Harvest Cleric Atoli of Moon Tree.

Haseo had saved Atoli from the belly of the giant fish, or the gatekeeper, in the AIDA server's operations folder with his Avatar.

"Haseo!" Atoli called out and made a smile motion.

He hadn't expected this reunion, and Ryo was lost for words.

"Hey! Haseo! I'm back in real life. Sakai and Zelkova are all right, too! Although I think I'd have preferred to not have my consciousness get sucked into a game at all..."

Atoli was desperate to make conversation. Kuhn placed a hand on her shoulder, then looked at Haseo. "Lot's happened... But it all turned out okay. Haseo?"

Kuhn was always the same. He always looked on the bright side. He couldn't change the way he was for people like Ryo.

If I can't say it now, when can I? Ryo thought to himself. He was the one feeling embarrassed. He was the one with the responsibility. Ryo tried to talk to Atoli. "Atoli..."

"Yes? Yes? Yes?!" Atoli spoke with excitement in her voice.

"I'm sorry... I hurt you, Atoli. I don't know your real name. But I'm sorry." Haseo lowered his head. He wasn't apologizing to the PC but her player.

"Me too."

"Atoli, I—"

"I heard about Shino."

Ryo hadn't expected this. He looked at Kuhn, confused.

Kuhn explained: Atoli was a candidate to be an Epitaph User, and as someone who was important to G.U., Yata had told her the basics of his background story.

"Ovan told me some too. After Shino was PKed, she didn't log-in again." It seemed that Atoli believed that after Shino had been PKed, she had been too shocked to log-in to *The World* again. "Haseo, you've been fighting in *The World* for half a year now." Atoli was trying to understand Haseo. "I don't think I can help but irritate you sometimes. Moon Guild teaches that we have to make *The World* a better place. Losing consciousness, the AIDA, that stuff can't be allowed to happen."

"No. I shouldn't have been angry with you."

"There is no single correct path to take. You have to do what's best for you."

"Atoli, we need to do this another way."

He told her that now, when Haseo spoke to Atoli, it was actually Ryo speaking to Atoli's player.

"To me?"

"That way, we won't misunderstand."

He meant in reality or online. They wouldn't go wrong, because it was two people speaking, not two make-belief characters.

"Well said, Haseo!" Kuhn slapped Haseo on the back. "You're a good boy! I don't think the Terror of Death suits you!"

Kuhn pushed Haseo and Atoli together to reconcile.

They made a hand-shaking motion.

Because Ryo was an Epitaph User, he could very faintly feel the touch of Atoli's hand. Because he used an Avatar, there was less distance between Ryo and Haseo.

"Great! Friends! Forever! Smiles all around!"

Kuhn, Ryo, and Atoli all grinned.

However there was something Ryo couldn't leave be: "Atoli?" Ryo turned the topic to something more serious. He had to ask. He had to ask about something Pi had said, even if Atoli wouldn't tell him.

"Yes?"

"You can't hear...? Is that true?"

Atoli fell silent for a moment.

"It is," she quietly affirmed.

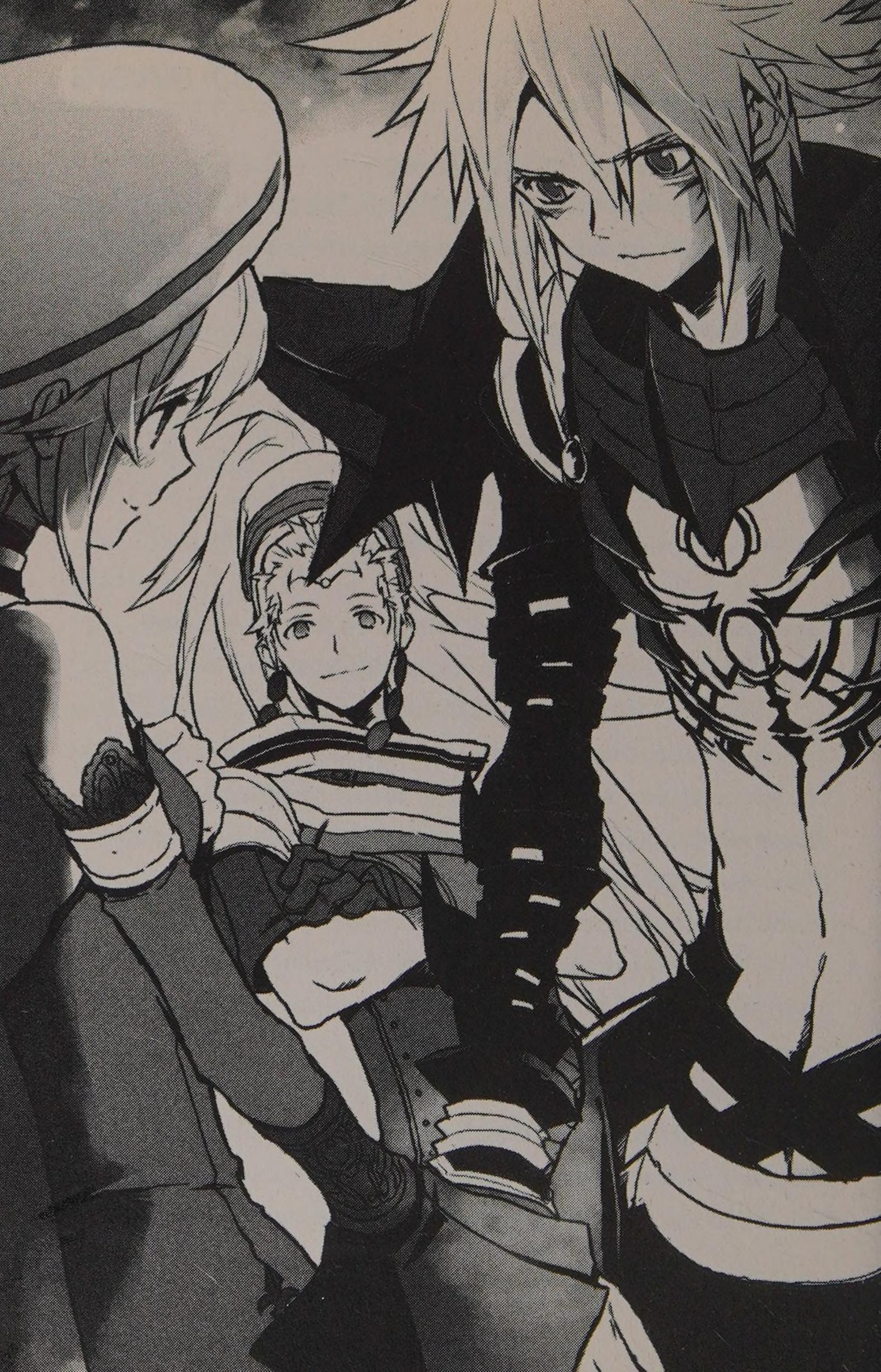


"It seems that Atoli's Morganna Factor, the Mirage of Deceit, a 2nd Phase Epitaph, has been stolen by the AIDA," Kuhn said pensively.

Pi had said that the AIDA may go after Atoli's Morganna Factor. By infecting Endrance through his cat, the AIDA had become interested in the power that linked an Epitaph User to its Avatar and the mind to the PC. The AIDA wanted to infect a human heart. Atoli had not yet awakened and was weaker than the others, so she was an obvious target.

"Yata told me all about Epitaph Users and Avatars. I didn't know because I hadn't awakened. But now I know that my special power, the Mirage of Deceit, was allowing me to hear things that regular players couldn't. I don't completely understand..."

She had heard something when they had left the Hy. Brasail arena and went to Morrigu Barrow Wall. She had wanted Haseo to like her, so she was helping him look for Tri-Edge's sign.



"When the Morganna Factor was stolen, she lost her hearing?"

"We don't understand the link yet, but that has to be the reason. In Epitaph Users, the Morganna Factor is a part of the PC. It's an organ," Kuhn answered.

"What about chat? If you can't hear, how can you chat?"

"I can hear that," Atoli said mysteriously.

"You can hear...? Oh."

With voice chat, whatever the other person says will come up as text in the message window, so she could read it. Haseo thought she was saying "hear" when she actually meant "read."

"Oh no, it's not like that," Atoli corrected Haseo.

"Huh?"

"When I'm logged into *The World*, I can hear."

Atoli's player could no longer hear, but when logged in to *The World* through the M2D speakers, or rather a connection to the brain, she could hear.

"You understand now, Haseo?" Kuhn interrupted them.

She went to the hospital for tests but they couldn't find a cause for her loss of hearing. She'd told her parents that playing in *The World* took her mind off things, so she'd been allowed to continue to log-in. Of course, her parents don't think something in an MMO had caused her to lose her hearing. She tried making another PC and logging in, but she couldn't hear anything with the new PC.

"Of course, the voice chat function is very useful now."

What did voice sound like in Atoli's world?

"Aren't you scared?" Ryo didn't know what to say. She'd lost her hearing because of something in this game, yet still she was logging in.

"Yes, I'm scared. But the way to make me better must be in *The World*," Atoli replied.

The cure had to be here.

Ryo had been logging into *The World* for half a year to save Shino.

"Ah. I'm sorry! I have a meeting with Moon Tree now," Atoli said as she remembered a prior engagement.

"Your guild..."

"I just want to carry on as normal. I can't in reality, but I can in *The World*."

The Harvest Cleric waved and then ran off to the terminal.
Atoli...

"Haseo!" Atoli had turned round before she'd reached the terminal. Now she was calling out to Haseo.

"Huh?"

"I really recommend Arche Koeln Waterfall. What number was it? Anyway! I'll tell you a story. I learned it from Zelkova!"

She was referring to an epic poem of *The World*.

Many thousands of years ago, there was a battle with the shadow. A skillful Wavemaster prayed to the gods to save humanity at the waterfall.

But I have to go.

My future is an eternal step into the future.

A shining step that links me to a million futures.

So one step is never enough.

She then turned back to the terminal.

After Atoli had left, he looked up at the waterfall of Arche Koeln, noting its rushing water noisily falling to the bottom.

"Heh heh."

"What is it, Kuhn?"

"You couldn't say what you wanted to Atoli, could you?"

Kuhn had hit the jackpot. Ryo screwed up his face in real life. "Yeah."

"Yes, it is very difficult to tell someone how you really feel. It's hard finding the right words. And then how will the words work together in the message window? Words never have just one meaning. Like a photo or a reflection in a mirror, it's never quite right. But still..."

Kuhn was saying that words couldn't ever truly reflect what a person felt.

"Words... A mirror..."

"When I was your age, I was in love. I was heartbroken. But I guess all men without a girl are heartbroken. Anyway, you should try. Tell her. Happy or sad, find words to express this. Show your feelings to her. Who knows what will happen, but you won't regret it." Kuhn empathized with Haseo. He stretched out his hand towards\ Haseo. "Let's get Atoli better. And Shino, too."

Haseo stretched out his hand too and they shook on it.

"Haseo, you didn't abandon Bo when Bordeaux was after him. You weren't scared to stand against a member of Kestrel. You were ready to sacrifice yourself. I saw what you were made of, then. I think Atoli felt the same, and that's how I noticed you."

"It wasn't that great..."

"I understand how you feel. Expressing yourself is hard. But don't worry about how people will react. You've saved Bo, you've saved Endrance, and you are fighting to save Shino. You've suffered for half a year. But because of all you've been through, you don't turn your back on people. Haseo, you have some really good points. You should use that to express yourself. You should do everything you can to achieve your dreams."

"Dreams?"

"Say what you want," Kuhn insisted. "Don't be embarrassed. Shout it out here in this waterfall. If you can, then it's real."

The mist of the waterfall rose up around them. They were surrounded by the roar of water.

All of it...

"I want to save Shino. I want to cure Atoli."

These feelings were always with him. This was a vow. He wasn't going to break this vow.

"Good."

If you don't ask, you don't get.

"You don't have to reject others to prove yourself. You don't have to hurt yourself or go against who you are to prove it, either. You don't have to prove anything. You just have to achieve."

"Kuhn..." Ryo had a friend, here. The first real friend he had made since joining *The World*.

Shino...

If Shino had been there, she would have been so pleased with him.

Ryo recalled Kuhn's words. It was how he planned to live life from this moment on.

"The thing that appeared at the end in the operations folder—it was definitely Tri-Edge."

After the transport command had been run, Tri-Edge or Azure Kite had Data Drained the giant AIDA fish with his blades.

"Pi and myself transported before you, so we didn't see it. But you say that Azure Kite attacked the AIDA monster?" Kuhn was thinking.

According to the Banshouya Files, Kite had been the name of the PC that had solved the Morganna incident seven years ago.

Tri-Edge isn't AIDA?

Then what is he? He had the same look as the bracelet-wearing hero. What was this strange doll?

What intentions did it have and to whom did those intentions belong?

One mystery was solved, and a million more were born.



INTERMISSION: THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

Here we roll back time a little, to the moment Reiko Saeki called upon translator Haruka Mizuhara.

After having been headhunted by CC Corp. to work on Project G.U., Reiko was able to read her brother's posthumous report, the "Banshouya File." Through the report, she came to know of *The World's* original creator, Harald Hoerwick, and she became interested in Emma Wielant's epic 'net poem based upon the game's universe, *The Epitaph of Twilight*. Thus, with the greatest of courtesy, and of course with a suitable gift in hand, she paid a visit to a specialist in the subject.

Her castle consisted of a forty-something-year-old apartment. Through an entrance and hallway piled high with trash bags, her workroom was lined on all sides with an impenetrable rampart of bookcases, containing comics, novels, and specialist books, each

THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

seemingly vying for supremacy like rival armies of old. Atop the work desk, which was the high table of this fortress, rested two notebook computers and an electronic dictionary.

Mizuhara Haruka was a translator.

“Twenty-four years old? So young! Yes, so young indeed.”

Haruka asked the visitor's age, and, looking impressed at her reply, noted mysteriously that she “dug the suit.” And, despite this, she was in appearance merely a small person wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and no shoes. Her hair was cut in a medium bob, faintly giving Reiko the impression of an actress she remembered playing a young proprietress in some antiquated drama.

It might have been polite to have commented on her own youth, but in reality, it hardly seemed appropriate. To look at her, Haruka was—well, to hazard a guess, one might put her at an age when it would be unsurprising for her to have her own middle-school-age children. Nonetheless, she had a youthful air to her. Reiko's own career and formality of bearing gave her an appearance of perhaps five years older than her true age, and so putting them together, it might even at a slight stretch be imagined that they were in the same decade. An unfamiliar observer might, in other words, find their ages to be indeterminable.

“You have such good-looking skin.”

“I don't get outside much.”

Haruka laughed self-deprecatingly, implying that staying as she did out of the sun's UV rays, she was not afflicted by tanning or wrinkles. She seemed, though, half-proud of this effect of her

work. Reiko, frequently troubled by rough skin and puffy eyes, was a little jealous.

“Translation must keep you pretty busy.”

“There’s always the ‘net if I find myself idle, though I don’t do so much gaming of late.” Haruka yawned. Though it was already two o’clock in the afternoon, it was apparent that she had only just woken up. She pulled out a selection of colas and juices from the fridge and gestured for Reiko to take what she wanted.

“Do you have any water?”

“Water? Just water, eh?” She fished out a miniature bottle of mineral water.

“So, do you not have much involvement with *The World* any more?”

“I guess I never got on much with *R:2*.” She said, though, that she had nothing against it, and started up a notebook.

“Your computer is the *R:2* launch commemorative model, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. I had high hopes for it, at the time.”

Choosing “*The World; R:2*” from the desktop, she logged in.

Her PC name was “W. B. Yates.”

The legendary ‘net poet who played all the way through from the time of *The World’s* beta version...

“Descendants of Fianna...” That term referred to the players who cleared the One Sin event: Orca and Balmung in the previous version. Haruka was close to them and was a well-known player in her own right.

THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

“Ancient history. All those PCs went up in smoke two years ago with the fire at CC Corp.”

Over 80% of the original *The World's* data was destroyed in the summer of 2015, when one of CC Corp's buildings caught on fire. Vast amounts of PC data were said to be lost beyond recovery.

“I'm so sorry. You lost all your data, didn't you?”

“It was before you even entered the company, right?”

“Well, yes...”

“I created a character in *R:2* with the same name, but, somehow, it was just never the same.” Haruka said this while staring at the robed warlock, W. B. Yates, on her screen.

“So, then...” Rieko was intent to cut to the chase.

“Emma Wielant's *The Epitaph of Twilight*.” Haruka's expression changed in a flash. She was instantly immersed in thought, wearing the face of a professional woman.

“I had heard that you were one of the highest authorities on *The Epitaph of Twilight* in *The World*.”

“Still, what could I, a mere ordinary player, possibly tell someone from CC Corp itself?”

“I would very much like for you to tell me about it.”

“Are you asking as a CC Corp employee? Or is this a more of personal request?”

“Both. In a personal capacity, I would like to increase my knowledge of a game in which I have an interest, and building on that, make use of it in my work,” Reiko replied honestly.

“Very well. In that case, what you’re looking for won’t come cheap.”

“I have enough—”

Haruka chuckled, encompassing something of a hearty laugh. “Just how much do you know about Emma Wielant and *The Epitaph of Twilight*?”

“I searched out everything I could from the ‘net.”

As a matter of courtesy, she had come prepared. She knew, after all, that what she was after resided here and not there.

“Very well. Then, I shall tell you something that simply cannot be found upon the ‘net.” Haruka spoke as if channeling W. B. Yates.

“What would that be?” Rieko pressed her.

“That which is engraved upon my own heart.”

Haruka started to relay the story.

The original manuscript of the epic ‘net poem *The Epitaph of Twilight*, which had been written by the German woman called Emma Wielant, no longer existed. That it once had was certain, but it was scattered and lost in the First Network Crisis of 2005. All that was said to remain was part of a fan translation into English—but, of course, there was no guarantee that such a work was of sufficient quality to reflect Wielant’s artistic intent.

It was true that while the translated work was that of an amateur, Emma Wielant herself was not a writer of great stature, either. It could only be said that a fan novel uploaded to a user’s own site had attracted such attention because of its being the basis of the universe of *The World*, with its twenty million users.

THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

“Harald Hoerwick may indeed simply have wanted to show the talent of his beloved Emma to the world,” Haruka said.

“Even among aficionados of the universe, it seems there is a great deal of discussion on that point.”

“If it were possible to read the original, it would be impossible to establish the truth of it. And even if the manuscript is preserved somewhere, if no one can read, it then it’s as good as destroyed.”

“And your own conclusion?”

“It’s simply unanswerable. You must first simply accept that as your starting point. This is a question that taxes the imagination of its researchers.”

“Is this a guessing game? A kind of archaeology?”

“Simply a matter of literature, I would say.” Haruka indicated that this seemed obvious.

“I see.” Reiko forced a smile. Literature, indeed. A field concerning itself with the pursuit of an author’s mentality and human relationships through their works, seen through the lens of the history of their time.

“But what I am interested in now is not only Emma Wielant’s ’net epic. *The Epitaph of Twilight* and the game *The World* cannot be considered separately. Furthermore, the players that live within the world, too, are an indivisible part of the whole. *The Epitaph of Twilight* is the founding myth of *The World*, and precisely because these word—passed down from a god—exist, the feelings of the players are channeled into the power that even now gives form to the tale told upon the stage of *The*

World. Man-made... a story of a god who made men, and that god nourishes the people.”

“A founding myth...”

“Are you perhaps a person who believes in God?” Haruka—W. B. Yates— asked.

“An engineer must remain silent on things that cannot be described. There is no meaning in the telling of mysteries.”

“I see.”

“I am of course borrowing my brother’s words. I am not saying that I don’t believe in God, but simply that it is irrelevant for an engineer to concern themselves with theistic matters. Questions like ‘Why does the world exist?’ and ‘Why are we here?’ are simply... rather, for me, the question is one of what I should do, how, and for whom. These are the questions of an engineer.”

“*The Epitaph of Twilight* has already become a matter of urban legend—not a mythology, but a rather vulgar folklore. A thesis is not necessarily required. My studies are concerned not with proofs but with the means of analysis. The process of finding means to study *The Epitaph of Twilight* can be said itself to define the pleasure of our studies of it.”

“Then is there no way for you to either succeed or fail?”

“If the impossibility of success is the definition of failure, then it can be said that failure is inevitable. Still, in one sense, *The World* is supported only to the extent that there are students of *The Epitaph of Twilight*. And yet to the one and only authorized publisher of books of game canon, and equally to all the players who only

THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

know the outlines of the real answers, that must be both troubling and unsatisfying.”

“An engineer, too, must seek out answers. Though I do not believe there is only a single answer.”

“I like people like you.” W. B. Yates’ real-life counterpart showed her white teeth.

Reiko too shared the affection felt by Haruka. She too was a species of engineer—one who used words as her tools. Certainly if a person’s words were unclear, then the one who gave them shape would also be unreliable.

Reiko lifted the bottle of mineral water to her lips. “I met Kazushi Watarai.”

Upon hearing this, Haruka’s expression once again turned severe. “You spoke with Kazushi?” This development didn’t please her.

“He was the leader of CC Corp’s debugging team, the Cobalt Knights, during the Morganna incident seven years ago, after all. At present, he is not far removed from the work I am in charge of. I had thought perhaps he would talk to me.”

“Somehow I think he didn’t, though.”

“Yes. He wouldn’t so much as give me the time of day.”

“You two are in different worlds. Kazushi is... Well.”

“He seemed to me a man who lived rationally.”

“Indeed. In fact, it is as though he lacks all passion! As far as Albireo of the binary-starred eyes is concerned, eternal love consists of a single Lycoris flower blooming in his perfect *The World*.”

“Lycoris?”

“Engraved upon my heart...” Haruka sounded somehow envious. “The red flower of Nirvana that brightens this base world. Flower of the threshold,” she whispered.

Was this an anecdote unknown on the 'net? Reiko wondered.

“Lycoris gave the Cobalt Knights the run-around. And Kazushi Watarai, believing as he does in reason, and not knowing the fearful power that resided in his own spear, killed the one he loved most. It seems the power of the Spear of Wotan cut away part of his real-life soul.”

This, certainly, was a CC Corp secret of the highest order, and unobtainable on the 'net. The Morganna System, having attained a personality and sense of self-preservation, had created the debug item known as the Spear of Wotan in order to prevent the birth of the ultimate AI, Aura.

The Spear was a special item created to destroy the vagrant AIs that sprang from black boxes into *The World* during Aura's trial phase: NPCs created to sample players' thoughts. By that time, it had become clear that the specs of ordinary, mass-produced data did not suffice to deal with the ultimate AI. Morganna presumably feared the collection of data that would lead to Aura's birth. Using every means at its disposal, it attempted to kill Harald Hoerwick's Aura, which it presumed would attempt in turn to kill it. The Spear of Wotan that Albireo obtained did not directly contain any part of Morganna, but did hold a fragment of Morganna's power.

“Yet the boundaries of his soul, if only for a moment, touched the core of *The World*.”

THE TWILIGHT EPITAPH

The translator, having talked ever since getting out of bed, was seemingly now fully awake, and, facing her computer, began to check her mail. Observing her mutter complaints about missed deadlines and seemingly wanting to run away from what she was reading, Reiko deduced that the visit was at its conclusion.

Reiko expressed her gratitude and made to excuse herself, upon which Haruka said suddenly, "Has the film adaptation been confirmed? *The World*, I mean."

"Huh? Yes, it'll be made in Hollywood."

"It's been shelved so many times before. Do you think it'll really happen this time?"

"Well, it's certainly not short of passionate fans, especially fans from the original version. Of course, while in one sense that's a good thing..."

"It's not the same *The World* that the users create. It's exactly because the game makes them the protagonist, free of any pre-defined plot, that they can spread the wings of their imagination. Making it into a single, static film reduces all that to a single image."

"Every time a film is announced, there's resistance to the project. The director gets cold feet, then the actors... It's practically famous for being impossible to get talent cast."

The planning was being handled in America, and as the project belonged to a different department, Reiko had limited information, but the reason the film version of *The World* had been shelved numerous times before was more or less exactly that.

"If it ever does see the light of day..."

Haruka was asking indirectly to be allowed to handle the translation—the Japanese subtitles. So, then, she was still putting her work first and foremost. Of course, Reiko had no such authority, but by way of returning the professional courtesy, she naturally promised to put in a word with those in charge.

Leaving Haruka's workplace behind her, Reiko got into the car she had left in the garage. It was a red Maserati. The clothes she wore were habitually dark, but she felt a brightly colored car suited her.

The "boundaries of the soul," indeed...

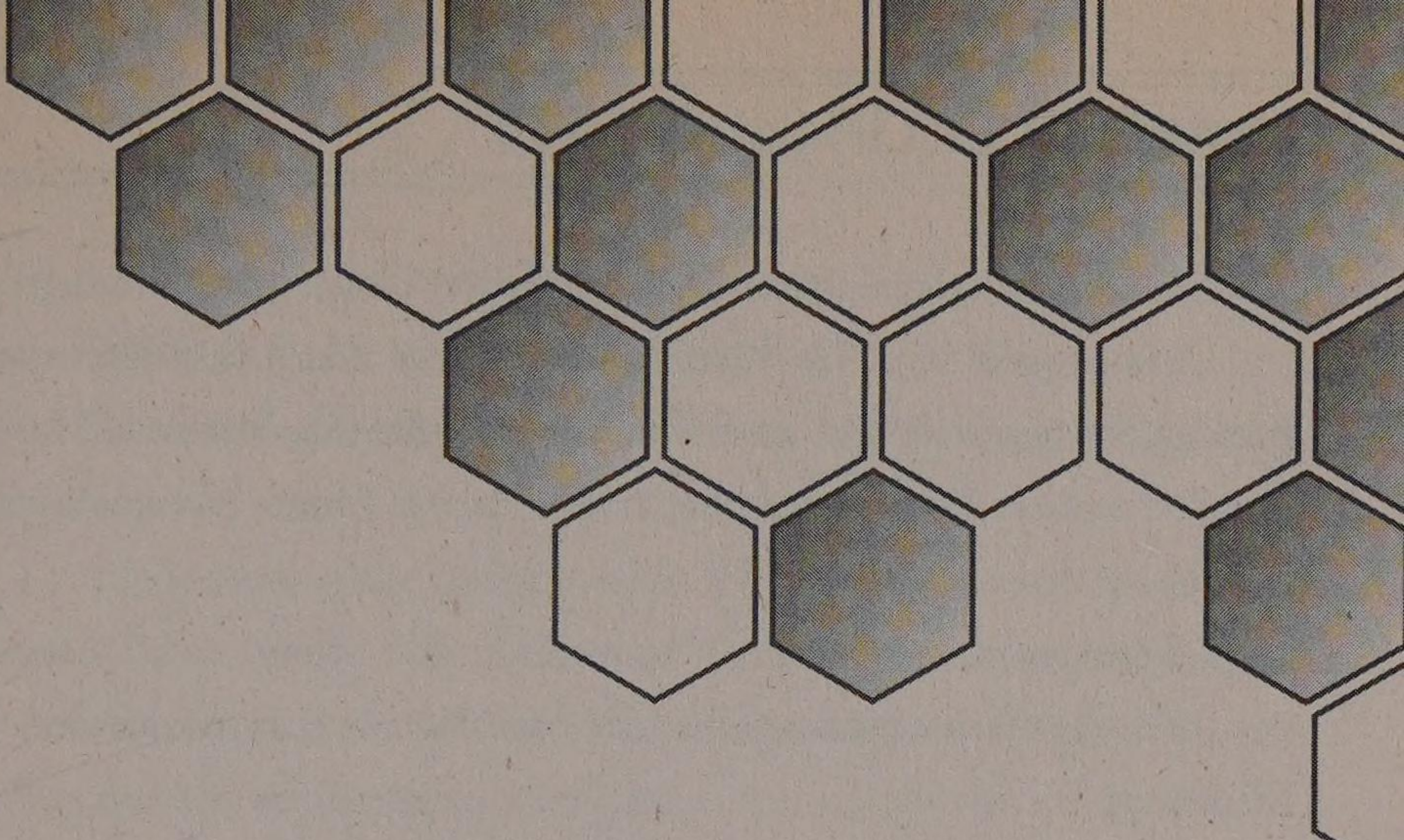
She committed the words the translator had casually spoken to memory.

Reiko had resolved to deliver her own soul's boundaries to Aura.

I must master Pi, she thought. I must be able to use it as my own flesh, or even better...

Her own body had become an obstacle.

She would implement her brother's legacy, the RA Project, and bring stability to the 'net. This was the Aura that Reiko sought.



CHAPTER THREE: THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

ONE

There is a girl who had been unconscious for over half a year. Every now and then, she would move so as if to not get bedsores. She wasn't brain dead, and she didn't need help breathing. She was kept alive via a nutritional drip. Her pulse was very weak. Her digestive organs functioned, but she wasn't given solid food. A tube removed her urine.

The doctors said that she was in a vegetative state.

However, the victim should be aware.

Shino...

This was the girl Ryo Misaki liked.

Ryo had had a shock when he had seen the tragic figure waiting for him on that winter day in Ikebukuro. He had resolved to save her.

The doctors couldn't save Shino Nanao,

Haseo was the only one who could save her.

He logged into *The World* to play out a fake life. Haseo was playing for the stakes of real lives and real deaths, however. Haseo rejected reality. He rejected this reality, where Shino Nanao lay on a bed.

I have power.

He hadn't been to see her for two days and so he needed to fill her in.

A special power that no one can defeat. A power that can save you.

He had been able to use the power to rescue Endrance's player, who had fallen unconscious while logged into *The World*. He had managed to resolve the AIDA server incident, where many players had lost awareness of their physical bodies. He knew that it wasn't simply a matter of deleting the AIDA. He had seen the light that returned the Lost Ones.

If you could see me now...

Shino wouldn't have fallen for him.

The end hadn't come when he got his power. Shino didn't wake up then.

What can this power achieve?

He opened his palm and looked at the blood vessels.

I'm here.

Skeith.

The feelings he had kept deep in his heart for Shino had realized themselves as an Avatar. But at some point, his desire to save Shino had turned into hatred of Tri-Edge. Haseo had lost his

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

way, but he had found Atoli, Sakubo, Kuhn, and Pi. They had helped him. Without them, he wouldn't still be here.

Maybe I could make friends. They are my first friends since the Twilight Brigade.

He looked at the bedside table. There was a vase of snow white daisies there. Seven. The number of those who protect the princess.

A nurse came in to check that everything was all right. Ryo was often in here, so she smiled at him.

Outside the window, the cicadas were chirping. But the way Ryo looked at the world was different now. Those little bugs sang so hard but died so quickly.

"Who gave these flowers?" Ryo asked the duty nurse about the Shino's other visitor. It seemed a little sad to decorate a hospital ward.

The nurse started to talk. He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes.

"Misaki, do you know the language of flowers?"

"No."

"Such beauty." The nurse brushed Shino's hair. "White daisies mean hope. Don't you think Miss Nanao looks so peaceful and beautiful, resting like this?"

Ryo didn't think Shino's ashen face looked beautiful. He hated it. He stood up.

Shino, where are you?

She wasn't in Shino's PC.

Shino Nanao's consciousness was somewhere within *The World*.

Truth. That was the pilgrimage Haseo was making now. And he came to this room to find his courage for another foray into *The World*.



TWO

△ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

The Shadow Warlock was opening up the guild shop near the Mac Anu fountain, as always. This was Sakubo—or at least today it was Bo. He was a member of the beginner's support guild, Canard. He sold revival potions to beginners at the lowest price there was on the market.

"What happened to those Kestrel idiots? I haven't seen them around recently."

"They won't hassle us now. Thanks to Haseo." Bo smiled.

Next to the Canard guild shop was the Kestrel guild shop. Negimaru and Grein were there. They seemed to be up their usual tricks. Upon seeing Haseo, they both stood up.

"Don't run away!" Negimaru was tense.

"Level-I33, again? The data was recovered. It was a little system data management error. No cheating!"

Haseo was a picture of serenity.

"I see." Negimaru backed down. He didn't want to make enemies of Haseo today, it seemed.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

“What about Bordeaux?”

“Hah?”

Negimaru clearly couldn't understand why Haseo, the PKer, would be asking about the notorious PKer Bordeaux. Grein didn't say anything.

“After fighting in the arena, I heard she was in a bad way.”

During the title match, Haseo had used data drain on Bordeaux. He later heard that she had been unconscious for some time.

“Yeah. She was unconscious for a while. But it's not like we care.”

Bordeaux hadn't rejoined Kestrel.

“I'm glad she's all right.”

“Huh?”

They didn't understand why Haseo was worried about Bordeaux. Confused, they sulked out of the square.

“Heh heh.” Bo had seen the exchange and now had a broad smile on his face.

He had said that he hadn't really understood what happened when they had been locked in the AIDA server, but it looked like he wasn't giving it too much thought. The real Bo must have been just a kid. He certainly didn't have an air of being very old.

“Hey, do you remember that Saku had sent an e-mail to Endrance?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I need to ask Saku something...” He needed to know who had sealed Endrance's mind and PC in the bottom of the lake at Indieglut Lugh

It must have been AIDA. The fake Cernunnos had disappeared in black bubbles.

Haseo didn't think that AIDA had infected Bo. But, Saku must know something.

"Saku isn't here."

"Isn't here?"

"Umm, yeah."

"You mean she quit *The World*?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask her."

This didn't really help, but there was no sense in interrogating a child. Perhaps something had happened in their family.

The e-mail that Saku wrote to Endrance said that she knew where his cat was and that she was waiting at Indieglut Lugh. Saku was probably lying so that she could see her Master En again. However, Saku had understood how important Mia was to Endrance.

I'll have to put Saku on hold for the moment.

Haseo said goodbye to Bo and began to head for G.U.'s headquarters. Yata had called them there.

"Haseo?"

"Hmm?"

"Umm..." Bo fidgeted.

"What? Is something bothering you?" Ryo looked into Bo's eyes.

"Haseo, will you join Canard?" Bo blurted out.

"Your guild?"

Bo's guild, Canard, was a beginner's support guild.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

"You helped me, right? You could help lots more people like me..."

That wouldn't be fun. But Haseo didn't say that. He wanted to help where he could, but he didn't have time to play in this game.

"Yeah. I guessed you wouldn't. You're an adult with lots of things to do," Bo muttered sadly and made a depressed motion.

Do I really have no time to spend with Bo?

That couldn't be. Even if he did spend some time with Bo in the game, he could still save Shino.

Shino will be really mad at me if I don't.

Ryo knew what he had to do. "I'll help Canard."

Ryo would never forget the expression of pure joy on Bo's face in that moment. This was probably the first happy thing that had happened since he started his battle half a year ago. Since he had been in the Twilight Brigade with Shino...



THREE

Raven @HOME The Serpent of Lore

G.U. had gathered for a meeting at the Serpent of Lore. Yata, Pi, Kuhn, Haseo, and even Endrance and Atoli were there. Endrance and Atoli were regular PCs, but Endrance was an awake Epitaph User and Atoli, had been a candidate to be one. Although not

officially members of this group, Yata permitted them to be involved.

“What do we know about Atoli’s symptoms?” Kuhn asked for a report about Atoli’s loss of hearing.

Ryo could sense the tension in the room immediately. Both Kuhn and Haseo had their reservations about Yata after the AIDA server incident.

“Return what was lost,” Yata stated.

“The Morganna Factor?”

The AIDA had stolen it. It was the factor within which the 2nd Phase, Innis, resided in Atoli’s PC.

“There must be a link between its loss and Atoli’s player’s subsequent deafness.”

It was the current theory. If Morganna Factors really were so important to Epitaph Users, then that would be the most obvious answer.

“I lost my Mia to AIDA, so I feel for you.” Endrance stepped in now. He walked toward Yata. “I was in a dream. But with Macha, I am able to get back Mia. I just needed to realize.” Finally, Endrance brought out his Avatar. From the rose stemmed a giant rapier. He aimed it at the Macabre Dancer.

“Endrance?!”

Pi could feel his lust for a fight and immediately summoned Tarvos. She stepped in to protect her master.

Endrance ignored the Tribal Grappler. With the tip of his sword pointed at Yata, he continued.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

“But it wasn’t AIDA who killed Mia a second time. I saw it. Two years ago. In the previous version of *The World*, something stabbed Mia and took her Morganna Factor.”

Ryo remembered this. He had seen some of Endrance’s memories, and in them had been an unseen hand of a god.

In front of Macha, Yata closed his eyes. He then started to operate the Serpent of Lore’s control panel. An information window opened. It was a file.

“The Banshouya Files?!” Haseo couldn’t believe his eyes.



CARPENTER’S FILE: SIXTH INTERIM REPORT— SALVAGE PLAN

THE LOSS OF THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA, WAS THE SECOND PARADIGM SHIFT OF *THE WORLD* AFTER THE SECOND NETWORK CRISIS, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE BIRTH OF AURA. *THE WORLD* HAD ENJOYED A PERIOD OF PROSPERITY BETWEEN 2011 TO 2014, BUT THEN IT ENTERED A DARK AGE. SERVER FAILURES AND NETWORK PROBLEMS NOT ONLY AFFECTED *THE WORLD*, BUT SPREAD OVER THE ENTIRE NETWORK.

CC CORPORATION KNEW THE CAUSE WAS THE LOSS OF THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA, SO THEY FORMED A NEW AMBITION—TO RECONSTRUCT AURA.

THEY PLANNED TO RECREATE THE ULTIMATE AI AND KEEP IT UNDER CONTROL, THUS CREATING THE NEXT GENERATION NETWORK

SOCIETY. THEY SAW A CHANCE JUST LIKE THEY HAD DURING THE FIRST NETWORK CRISIS OF 2005, WHEN THEY RELEASED ALTIMIT OS AND TOOK CONTROL OVER THE NETWORK. THIS WOULD BE THE SECOND COMING OF ALTMIT.

WITH THIS, UNDER THE AUSPICES OF CC CORPORATION, PROJECT G.U. WAS SET UP. THE PROJECT HAD A LIMITLESS BUDGET. ENGINEERS AND AI SCHOLARS WERE HANDPICKED TO COMPRISE A TEAM OF SPECIALISTS IN THAT FIELD. I, KNOWN AS CARPENTER JUN, WAS THE CC CORPORATION REPRESENTATIVE IN CHARGE OF THE PROJECT. THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT WAS TO RECONSTRUCT "AURA." THIS IS HOW G.U.'S "RA PLAN" STARTED.

LET ME EXPLAIN THE RA PLAN. IT WAS TO SALVAGE THE EIGHT MORGANNA ELEMENTS THAT WERE DESTROYED AND SCATTERED IN THE OCEAN OF DATA BY THE POWER OF KITE'S BRACELET IN THE 2010 MORGANNA INCIDENT. THOSE WOULD THEN BE PLACED IN A PLAYER'S DATA, SO THAT THEY COULD BE KEPT UNDER CONTROL.

THIS WASN'T WITHOUT PRECEDENT. THE PLAYER OF THE CHARACTER SORA, WHICH WAS ATTACHED TO SKEITH, HAD THIS. ALSO, THE ROAMING AI CAT-CHARACTER, MIA, WHO WAS THOUGHT TO BE ATTACHED TO THE 6TH PHASE, MACHA.

IN THIS PROJECT G.U., THERE WAS ONE MAN WHOM WE COULD NEVER REMOVE.

THAT WAS JOTARO AMAGI. AT JUST NINETEEN YEARS OLD, HE WAS AN ELITE GENIUS THAT WAS PLUCKED BY CC CORPORATION FROM THE INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION DIVISION OF THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY. HE WAS A PRECOCIOUS GENIUS. AMAGI

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

AND I WERE NOT THE TYPES TO GET ALONG NICELY WITH EACH OTHER, BUT IN THE END, WE DROVE THIS PROJECT BY COMPLIMENTING EACH OTHER WITH OUR KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITY. AMAGI AND I WERE THE TWO WHEELS OF G.U.. WHILE WE OFTEN HAD VIOLENT ARGUMENTS WITH NO REGARD TO AGE DIFFERENCES, IN MY HEART, A STRANGE FEELING OF RESPECT, JEALOUSY, AND CONTEMPT WAS BUDDING TOWARD AMAGI.

AMAGI AND I SEARCHED THE NETWORK AND FINALLY FOUND ONE OF THE DISSIPATED MORGANNA ELEMENTS—MAGUS, ALSO KNOWN AS THE PROPAGATION. AFTER SOME TRIAL AND ERROR, WE SUCCEEDED IN FASTENING THIS TO A PLAYER IN *THE WORLD*. WE HAD A COMPLETE PROTOTYPE, AND IT GAINED THE NAME EPITAPH-PC.

HOWEVER, NOT A SINGLE PERSON ON THE PROJECT, INCLUDING AMAGI OR MYSELF, COULD USE THIS EPITAPH-PC. WHEN ANYONE LOGGED INTO *THE WORLD* WITH THAT CHARACTER, THEY WOULD FEEL UNBEARABLE DIZZINESS, NAUSEA, AND HEADACHES. WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE MORGANNA ELEMENT, LIKE THE CASE OF SKEITH AND SORA, SHOWED A HIGH EFFECT ON HUMAN SOULS. HOWEVER, WAS THIS ONLY TRUE FOR THE “CHOSEN FEW.”

AMAGI’S REASONING WAS THAT THE MORGANNA ELEMENTS CHOOSE WHICH PLAYER TO ATTACH TO. THE CONDITIONS ARE UNKNOWN, BUT THE MORGANNA ELEMENTS ONLY ACKNOWLEDGE A CERTAIN TYPE OF HUMAN. IF THAT WERE TRUE, THEN SEARCHING FOR THOSE EIGHT CANDIDATES WOULD BECOME AN IMPORTANT TASK FOR PROJECT G.U.. AT AMAGI’S SUGGESTION, IN THE SECURITY DIVISION, A QUALIFIER SEARCH TEAM WAS ESTABLISHED AND A PRUNING OF PLAYERS BEGAN.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE PLAYER SORA HAD ALREADY CANCELLED THEIR SUBSCRIPTION BY THIS TIME.

AMAGI AND I CONTINUED TO SALVAGE THE REMAINING SEVEN MORGANNA ELEMENTS: SKEITH, INNIS, FIDCHELL, GORRE, MACHA, TARVOS, AND CORBENIK. DURING THIS TIME, WE DISCOVERED THAT THE MACHA ELEMENT HAD ONCE AGAIN ATTACHED TO THE PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED CAT CHARACTER, MIA. WE SUCCEEDED IN EXTRACTING IT BY DESTROYING THE CAT CHARACTER.

THEN, WE CAREFULLY CREATED ALL THE EPITAPH-PC CHARACTERS. ALL THAT WAS NEEDED THEN WERE CANDIDATES TO CONTROL THEM. ONCE THE POWER OF THE EIGHT PHASES HAD BEEN INVOKED, AMAGI COULD CONTINUE THE RECONSTRUCT AURA PLAN.



Gateway to Utopia... The utopia Project G.U. had been aiming for.

This was the sixth file that Ryo hadn't seen yet.

"There are six Banshouya Files. There may be others, but we don't know. They may have been lost in the fire two years ago, or they may never have existed," Pi explained.

In other words, they didn't know much more than what was written in the files.

It was obvious that the RA Plan that Jun Banshouya and Jotaro's Project G.U. was working on had failed. The ultimate AI, Aura, was still lost.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

Endrance carefully read the sixth file on the screen. The file told him the truth about the death of his beloved Mia. Project G.U. and CC Corp had destroyed her.

“CC Corp... Mia!” Endrance thrust the tip of Macha at Yata. He was emotional.

Pi used Tarvos to get between them.

“Yata has nothing to do with Mia. This file’s video was from 2015. It was two years ago,” Pi said calmly.

Endrance’s rage had no outlet. His sword swung through the air.

Behind Pi, Yata spoke sternly. “The game data is intellectual property of CC Corp. Even programs created by Harald Hoerwick. Contractually, he forfeited all rights regarding *The World*. The Morganna Factors belong to CC Corp. You signed the user agreement, agreeing to the limitations of your rights. An illegal vagrant AI like Mia was never yours!”

“Yata. That isn’t Endrance’s problem,” Kuhn interrupted. “He’s angry at what was in there. What if you were Elk, Endrance?”

Pi didn’t back down. Only Yata knew that it was her brother who had written that. “I have a real cat,” Pi spoke. She wanted to get through to Endrance’s player. “An Abyssinian that had been left alone in a pet shop. Her life had value though. Even just a toy cat would have value...”

“It doesn’t matter if it was a real cat or a toy cat that was killed. It’s a loss.”

“STOP! STOP!” Kuhn yelled. “These problems are too great for now. We should be concentrating on Atoli! We need to get her

better. We need to focus!" The atmosphere was heavy, but Yata managed to change his attitude seamlessly.

"By stealing the Innis factor, the AIDA have a new power. It's not an infection; it is a manifestation of will in *The World*. Even if incomplete, they created the AIDA server to take the Innis factor."

"It was all because of me?!" Atoli was shocked. She was lost for words. Because of her, all the players had been taken prisoner. Some of Moon Tree had even known death.

"Yata! This can only be speculation!" Kuhn was angry.

"It's the truth," Yata replied, cool as ever.

"Lock it down!" Kuhn screamed. "Lock down *The World's* servers!" Kuhn had thought of this option before.

"No one would believe that an online game was hurting people. That's why there was no lockdown seven years ago, when players were becoming Lost Ones. CC Corp is just thinking of the best solution," Yata replied calmly. "If there were no players in *The World*, the AIDA would lose interest. Their interest would turn to external areas."

"What? External..."

"We have no choice but to deal with the AIDA within *The World*. Whether legally or illegally, there are confines to *The World*. When those are lost, it will break out. The AIDA will infect areas outside *The World* and expand the infection across the network. It may bring about a third crisis. Only then will there be lock down the network as you wish, Kuhn. But it will bring about another dark age. So we have to avoid that at all cost." Yata pointed his fan at Atoli.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

"If we abandon *The World*, there will be no way of returning Atoli's player's hearing, and no way to rescue Shino Nanao."

Yata was right. But it wasn't like they could be happy about it.

"I..."

"What is it, Haseo?"

Haseo felt he should include his two cents. "There is no alternative. *The World* is a place to fight the AIDA." Haseo didn't want *The World* to be locked down either.

"That's enough today, Kuhn," Pi said. She spoke like a superior to her part-time worker. "More tomorrow."

Kuhn didn't have anything left to say now. He left the Serpent of Lore behind.



FOUR

Tomonari Kasumi played Kuhn. Born and raised in Kanazawa, he had graduated from high school and entered a specialist collage. He now lived alone in an inner-city apartment. He was twenty-four. He had no career. He just took jobs as they came along. He mainly worked in an amusement arcade.

But currently, Tomonari had another job. His other job was a system admin support for the MMO *The World*. He was a GM. His current duties included Project G.U..

G.U. pays so much better than amusement arcades...

Getting a stable salary was a real relief, even though it restricted time. He was also aware of the dangers of AIDA, unlike regular people. He knew everything, so he planned to get a better salary than most newcomers to CC Corp.

It was Tomonari Kasumi's dream to join CC Corp.

He wanted to design games, and he had gone to school to study how it was done. He had spent time with his friends for their final thesis, creating a silly and inappropriate game. He had failed to gain employment at a company for any length of time. He had no dreams left. The digital photos on his computer told a story.

I hadn't grown.

When he had gained power through his Epitaph-PC, his life had changed.

Kuhn had been scouted as a candidate Epitaph User of Propagation. He had only met Pi once in real life, then. She was an amazing engineer who had graduated from a top university. To his surprise, she had been around the same age, which had made him only feel more wretched about his current situation.

But Tomonari was not going to let her win.

He was going to do something about it! Of course, he did not want to lose to Rieko, because she was a similar age. Rieko probably understood how he felt.

He stared through the glass of a coffee shop outside the station.

Kanazawa was a much prettier place than Shinjuku and Ikebukuro. The food was good. There was history. There were lots of good childhood memories here for Tomonari.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

There was just one thing missing.

“Are you leaving Tokyo?”

The sun shone down.

He had dreamed that he would go to the city. He was so desperate to improve himself. So he felt that leaving his home was the best option. He had been promised a stable salary, so he had to go. Tomonari's one advantage was his youth.

Kuhn had thrown everything he was into the chaos that was AIDA and *The World*.

He wanted to solve the problem of the Lost Ones.

To find destiny and realize a dream, he had to pull out all the stops. It was a time to cling to dreams.



Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

The central area of Mac Anu, with its fountain, looked like a bazaar. All the major guilds had their stores here. People flooded in to take advantage. The personal shops of the smaller guilds got lost. Canard's shop, which Sakubo opened, wasn't run for profit, though. Its aim instead was to provide cheap items to beginners. Of course, not all items were functional. There were some items like flowers that players could enjoy for their own sake.

From the top of the bell tower, Kuhn looked down.

He was invisible. Kuhn was transparent and couldn't be seen by regular PCs. The top of the bell tower wasn't an area where regular PCs could stand. Kuhn had system privileges though, and so he could do this and look down on areas.

It's peaceful.

He was like a comic book hero.

The eternal sun cast light over Root Town. The labyrinth of streets were carved with shadows. Regular PCs couldn't see this, either. This was the place Kuhn had hoped for. In the previous versions of *The World*, a PC called Balmung had fought off monsters to clear the One Sin and become a hero. In the Fragment days of the game, thanks to the tales of a PC called W. B. Yates, Balmung and his friend Orca had become the Descendents of Fianna. They were special.

I am here.

Tomonari had logged out in a fit of rage after the argument at the Serpent of Lore yesterday. He had read the Banshouya Files that had been distributed to G.U., including the sixth and final file.

Endrance had used a PC called Elk in the early days of *The World*.

Tomonari recalled what happened six years ago.

The weird zombie that had been in the coin locker area... Haseo called it Tri-Edge. It wielded twin swords with blue flames. The similarities couldn't be denied.

The hero, Kite. The PC that had solved the Morganna incident seven years ago.

Tomonari didn't have to read the files. He had known Kite.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

Tomonari Kasumi had been one of the Lose Ones during the Second Network Crisis and the Morganna incident.

His PC's name was Sieg. He had been an excellent player. He had so wanted to be like Balmung. At some point, he came into contact with the Morganna System and had fallen unconscious. Kite had been the one to save him. The group, including Balmung, had come to be known as the .hackers. There had also been a girl in his class called Mai Minase, who had helped him so much in the real world.

He felt sad recalling that time.

Mai...

The name .hackers soon spread over the Internet, after the various incidents that happened, just as the file said. The name took on a life of its own though, and lots of people claimed to be .hackers. However, Tomonari had his own ideas. Sieg hadn't been worthy of Mai Minase. He hadn't been a hero.

Sieg had been a victim.

It wasn't what Tomonari had wanted for himself. He didn't want to be a side-character, killed off at the end of the film. He wanted to be a hero like Kite or Balmung, who solved the crisis.

This power moved the story on. The power to save people.

After graduating from high school, he and Mai had taken different paths. They started dating over e-mail. They split up. Mai went abroad to work as a volunteer and lived in places like Africa and Southeast Asia.

The life of the girl he loved had been saved by another. Then he was left behind. Tomonari had been hurt, and now he was a serial flirt out of simple habit.

If I had been the hero...

If he had been that man... If the story had been different, perhaps Mai Minase would be with him now. The chances of that happening were slim. It would take a miracle. She wouldn't want to be with some loser jumping between jobs, living in Kanazawa. He didn't have enough to offer. She wasn't going to bring joy into his life again.

I'm going to solve this AIDA problem.

This time he was going to do it.

Seven years ago, the Morganna incident was never really made public. The CC Corp government presence suppressed the birth of the ultimate AI, Aura, and that the Second Network Crisis had originated from within *The World*. The presence of Aura was sealed in a cathedral behind the network. Only those involved, like Kite, and Lost Ones, such as Tomonari, were aware of the gravity of the situation and truly understood what had happened. The Banshouya Files were the only documentation to record it.

I will save the Lost Ones this time. Kuhn promised himself as he looked out over the city streets. *I like this view.*

He sensed something. There was something behind him. On guard, Kuhn turned around...

"You!"

It was the man with the huge, deformed left arm—Ovan.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

This was the original master of the guild Twilight Brigade, which had made a name for itself by discovering Lost Grounds. To system administrators, he was a cheater, carrying a huge amount of illegal data in his PC. That he had spotted Kuhn in this invisible mode was even more proof that he was a hacker.

"This is against the user agreement," Tomonari scolded instead of greeted him.

"I wanted to speak with you." He meant that he wanted to speak face-to-face and not over e-mail.

"Speak to me?" Every muscle in Tomonari's body was tense. For some reason, he was part of Ovan's plan. Ovan was a man who ran in the shadows of *The World* with his own opinions of the AIDA phenomena.

"Kuhn, Sieg... Tomonari Kasumi. Seven years ago, you were a Lost One in the Morganna incident."

Ovan knew what happened behind the scenes in *The World*.

"You know a lot about me." Kuhn hid his shock and inspected Ovan. There was no need to run and hide.

I won't be upset by words.

This man was a hacker, a criminal. Here in *The World*, Kuhn had the advantage. He was a system administrator and an Epitaph User.

"This way. I don't want Yata to see."

"I have no intention of saying something that will get me in trouble," Kuhn said.

"Oops, have I got this wrong? Are you just as in love with Yata as Pi is?" Ovan tried to provoke Kuhn.

"No. But I am proud of my work in G.U." Kuhn tried to sound confident.

"G.U. work?"

"Solving the AIDA problem and saving the Lost Ones," Kuhn said resolutely.

"That's not really what G.U. or Yata is after."

Kuhn said nothing.

"What a telling silence," Ovan said, as if Yata was there with them. "But soon you'll know exactly what sort of man Yata is. You saw how he prioritized his own research over the safety of players on the AIDA server. He lusts after knowledge. He has always been selfish."

Kuhn couldn't help but agree with this assessment of Yata, but...

"What are you after?"

What did Ovan stand to gain from causing an internal argument within G.U.?

"Kuhn... Sieg... You always wanted to be a hero, like Kite or Balmung."

"What about it?"

"But you just became a helpless victim. That must be difficult to handle."

"Yeah, but I'm here now as an Epitaph User."

"You're a tool. Yata never listens to you."

He doesn't respect my opinion.

Ovan understood exactly how Kuhn felt. He had seen straight into his heart and witnessed the ill-feeling Kuhn had toward Yata.

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

"A tool. I guess." However, he couldn't get this wrong. "But I have to be in G.U. to achieve what I want. Without G.U., I won't grow."

Kuhn kept his eyes on Ovan. This was a dangerous situation. If he was getting suspicious, it meant there was no one he could trust. Tomonari had to find out what Ovan was after.

"Is it scary to throw away this brilliant scenery?" Ovan looked out from the bell tower.

It was twilight. The town's day was finished, and evening had come.

Without having system privileges, he wouldn't have been able to do this. He didn't have wings like Balmung. He so wanted to be Balmung.

"How about this?"

In an instant, Mac Anu's sunset reversed.

Suddenly, the view looked like a negative film on the display.

"What?"

"The opposite. This is an outer dungeon. The Serpent of Lore can't reach here."

"What? Even in the Serpent of Lore?"

If even the system of *The World* couldn't do it... Didn't that mean PC Kuhn was lost?

"But I am here."

Cogito Ergo Sum. Kuhn recalled the words Ovan had said to Haseo on the AIDA server. "This is illegal."

"Illegality... What about CC Corp and *The World* itself? They all plagiarized Harald Hoerwick's work. You have let your desire to enter CC Corp cloud your vision."

"No I haven't!"

"Your desire for money, then."

"This is more than a job! I..."

"Say how you feel!" Ovan had asked the same of Haseo once. "What's the matter? Are you embarrassed? Worried it's all lies?" Ovan continued to torment Kuhn.

"I will save the Lost Ones!" Tomonari screamed over the negative image.

"In other words?"

"I hate what I was! I hate what I was back then!" Tomonari screamed.

Sieg had been saved as a Lost One, but as Kuhn, he would save Lost Ones. He would save what he had lost.

"Well said." Ovan complimented him. "That is the real Tomonari Kasumi. If you reject who you were, then maybe something will come back to you... However..."

Ovan was indicating that this was something that couldn't be done without CC Corp and G.U.. Ovan was stoking Tomonari's resentment. "Yata...?"

"Why are you doing this? Ovan... Haseo and the others, are they deceiving me?"

"Don't think badly of people. I am watching Haseo. And I am watching you, Kuhn. No matter what happens in *The World* or

THE DOOR TO UTOPIA

what your existence is, you shall be loved. If I were you, I would reject the flaws in myself and aim for something higher. Step up in this world.”

Then the world reversed.

The back of the back is not the same thing as the front, however. This was the MMO called *The World*, after all.

Kuhn had been forcibly transported. There was black everywhere.

Thunder cut into the black space. The noise went straight through the speakers to his brain. The clouds started to clear. Great, unimaginably tall towers soared into the sky.

“Where is this?”

Tomonari forgot himself. However, Kuhn was there. It was the same as when his Avatar was out; he lost the sensation of his real body...

Ovan was standing next to him. “This is the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel.”

This was an undiscovered lost ground.

“Six Ringing Peaks?”

“Do you remember what I asked you at Morrigu Barrow Wall when we were in the AIDA server?”

Kuhn did remember. “You asked me what was on the other side of the wall.”

“That’s right. I wanted to see the other side.”

“Of the wall...”

“Real and a game. Now and the past. Men and women. Friend or foe. They all have boundaries. Where do they start? All can be

found in the Lost Grounds.” Ovan watched the clouds of the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel as he spoke. “People who see this have wisdom,” Ovan said to Kuhn. “But you can’t just rely on senses. You have to be wise to the world.”

Senses and wisdom... “Ugh.”

“That is power. What can you achieve with power?”

Ovan was talking about Kuhn.

“What?”

“Your eyes. Use them.” Ovan’s left arm twitched. “Look. Take it all in. This is the pinnacle of truth in *The World*.”

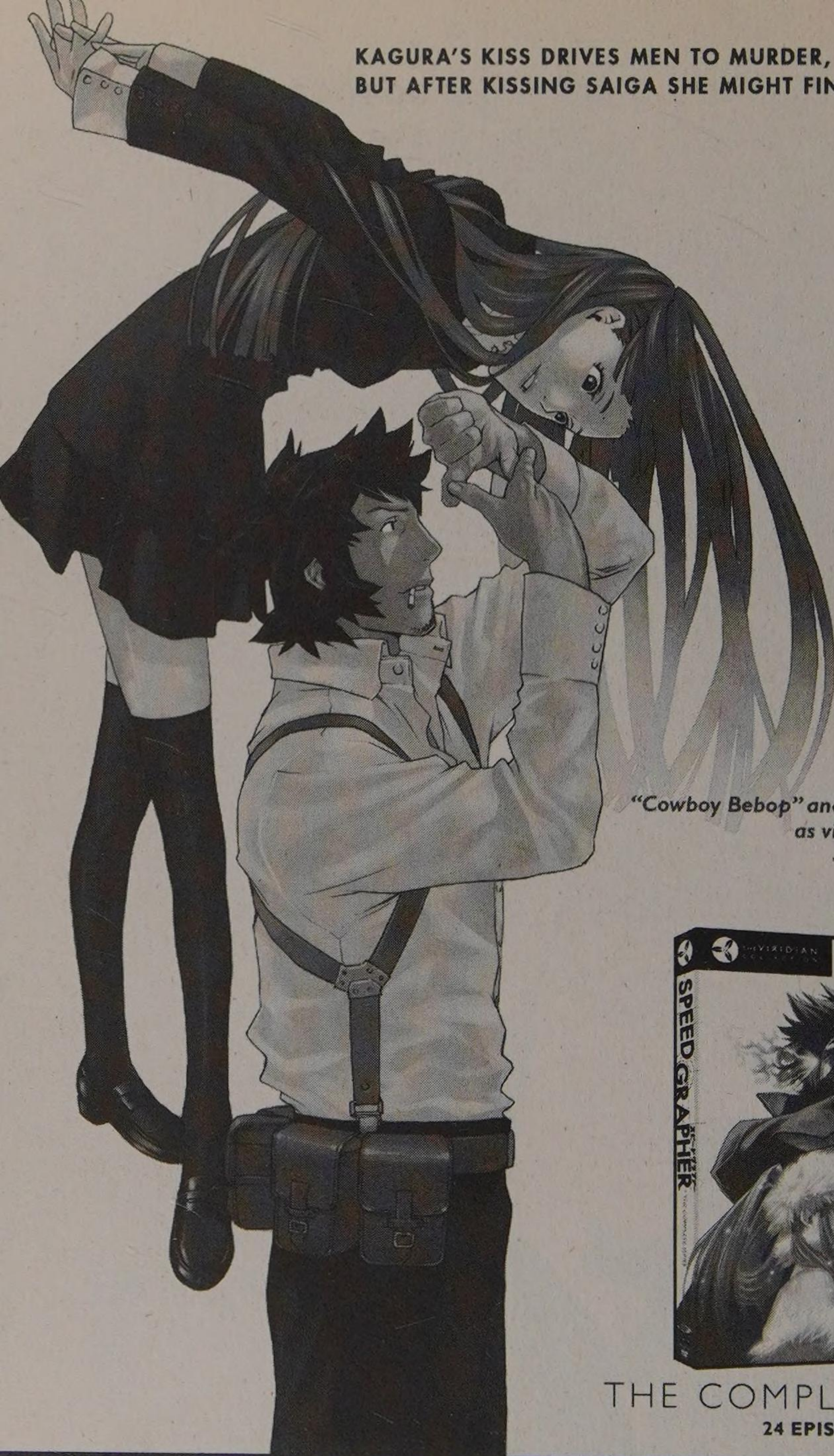
“Huh?” In the swirling storm clouds, a window opened. It must have been a gust of wind. And then information came flooding down like light. It burned Kuhn.

“Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!” He couldn’t take it. Kuhn’s screaming resonated across all the pinnacles of the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel.

To be continued...



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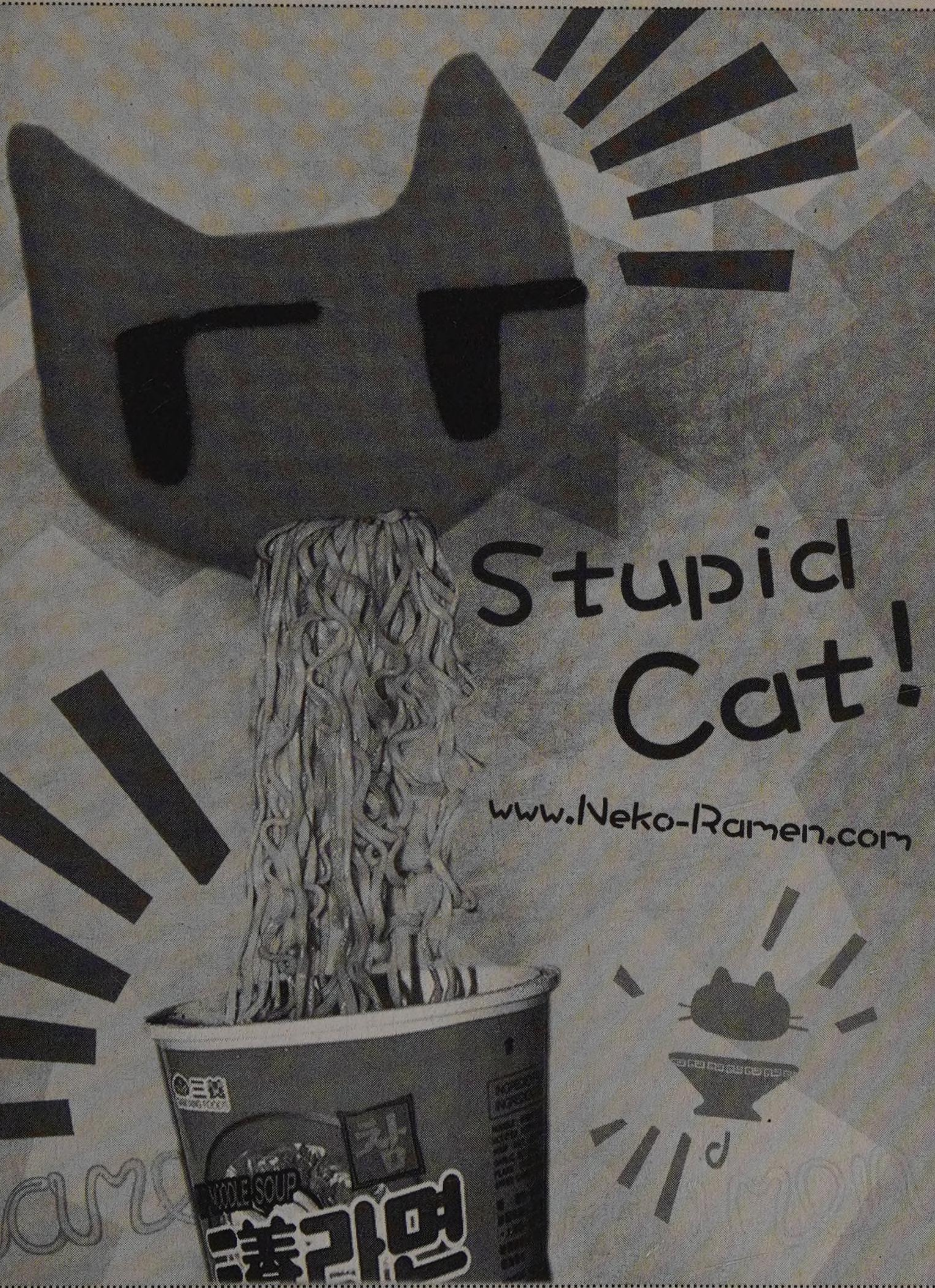
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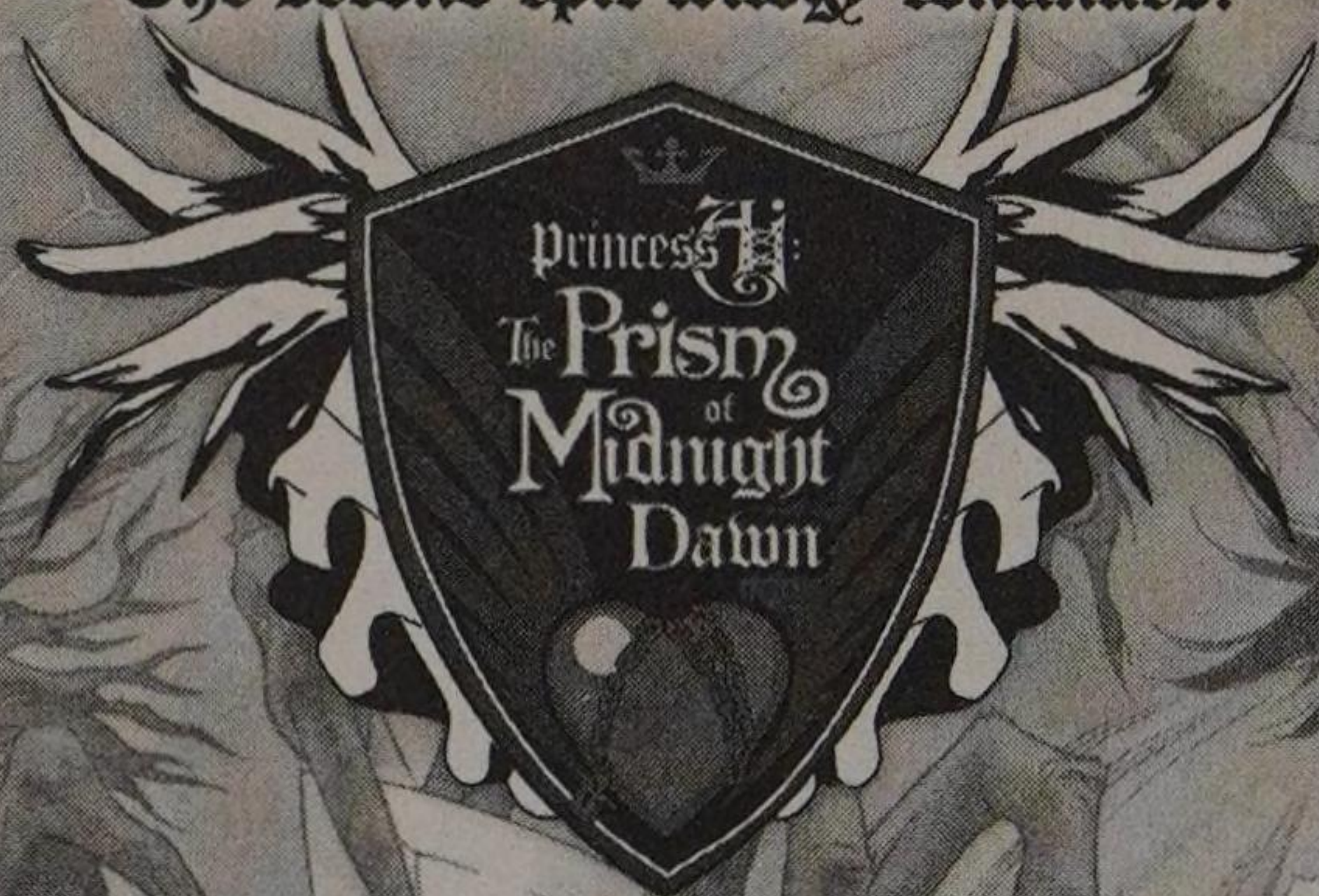
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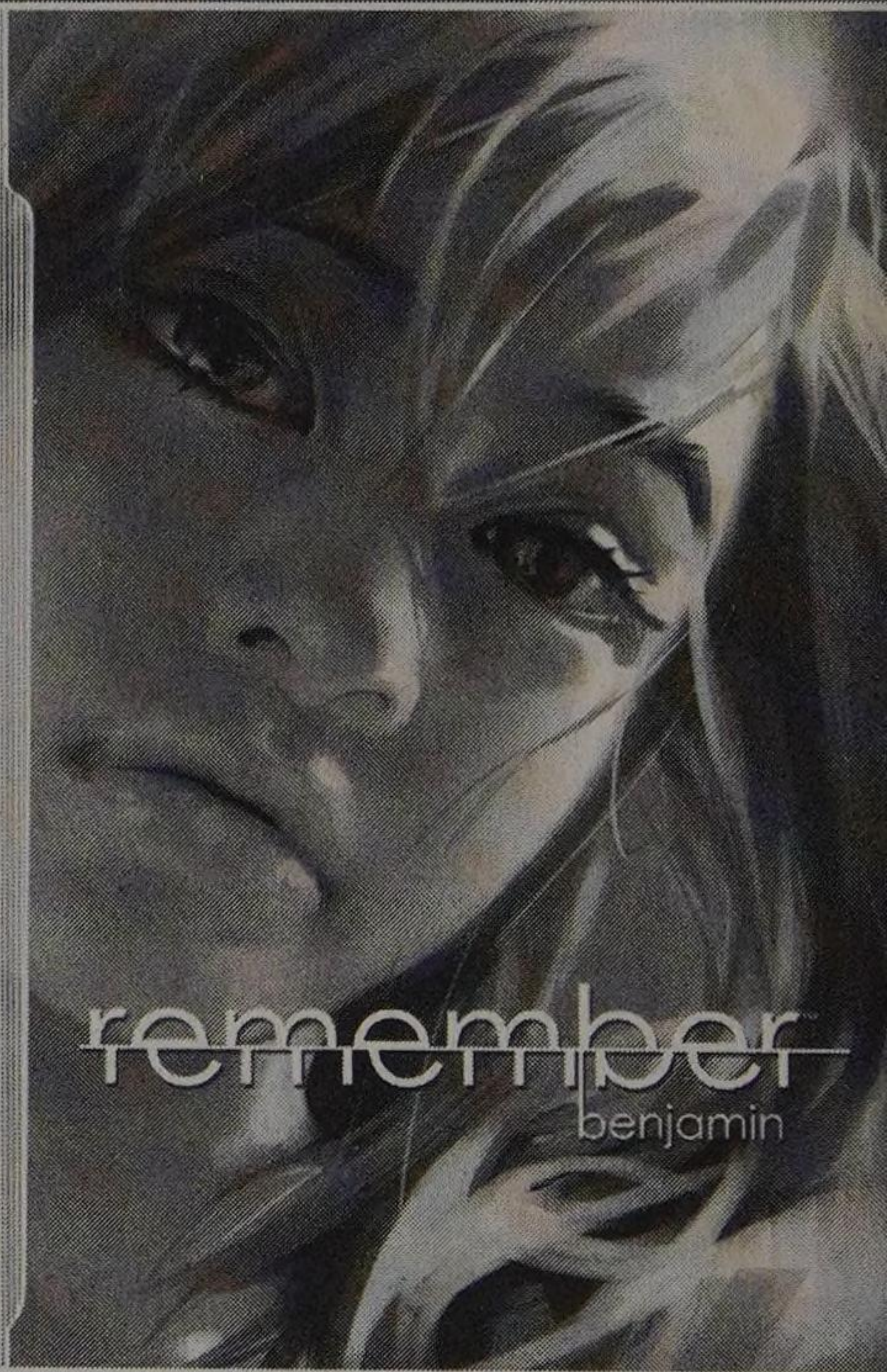
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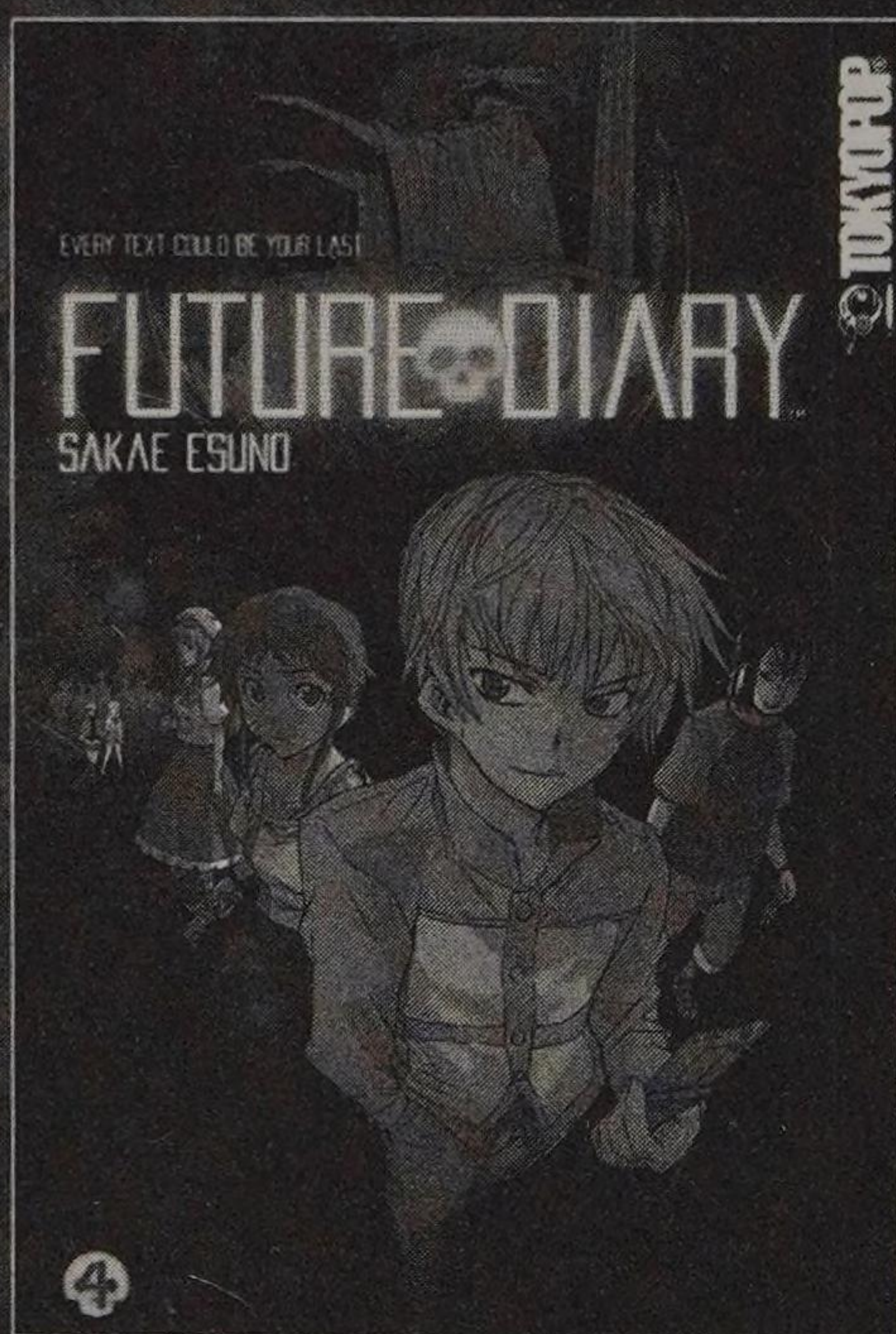
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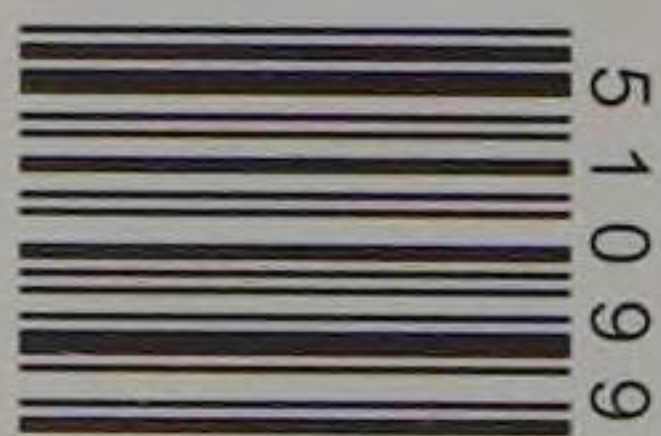
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